

Aide-de-Camp's Library



सत्यमेव जयते

Rashtrapati Bhavan
New Delhi

Accn. No. 343

Call No. IX (a) - 8



Aide-de-Camp's Library

(LIBRARY)

The book should be returned on or before the date
last stamped below

[illegible]



ARAB INTERLUDE

BY

CLARE SHERIDAN

AUTHOR OF "NUDA VERITAS"

"To memories that can never fade . . ."

IVOR NICHOLSON & WATSON
LIMITED LONDON

1936

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

First Published in 1936

Printed in Great Britain by T and A. CONSTABLE LTD.
at the University Press, Edinburgh

CONTENTS

CHAP	PAGE
FOREWORD	9
I. HOW WE CAME TO ALGIERS	13
II HOW WE CAME TO BISKRA	20
III. ARTERY OF THE OASIS	28
IV. BY CAMEL	34
V. CONSEQUENCES	48
VI THE PARSONAGE	54
VII RETURN JOURNEY	57
VIII. BUYING LAND	71
IX. ZORA	77
X. BUILDING A HOUSE	85
XI. A PRIEST IN THE GARDEN OF ALLAH	94
XII THE HOUSE OF SLIMANE ALI	102
XIII A WEDDING IN THE VILLAGE	108
XIV. THE POOL OF WATER	114
XV GOING	120
XVI. . . . AND COMING BACK	131
XVII. ORIGIN OF THE BEN GANAS	135
XVIII. BEHIND THE SCENES	144
XIX. SLAVES AND MASTERS	153
XX. DECORATION	163
XXI. BATHROOM AND KITCHEN	168
XXII FEUD	176
XXIII. MAHAMI'S MARRIAGE	185
XXIV. A BISKRA SUMMER	192
XXV. CONSTANTINE	201

ARAB INTERLUDE

CHAP.	PAGE
XXVI. AISSA'S FARM	208
XXVII. FLOOD	217
XXVIII. LUNATICS AT LARGE	221
XXIX. COUSINS OF THE KING	224
XXX. HORSES	228
XXXI. ID	233
XXXII. FOR HONOUR'S SAKE	243
XXXIII. UNCLE AND NIECE	247
XXXIV. "BABY"	255
XXXV. FROM DESERT TO MOUNTAIN	262
XXXVI. DESERT NEIGHBOURS	272
XXXVII. THE DIFFERENT WAY	282
XXXVIII. INHERITANCE!	288
XXXIX. SELECTING A WIFE	295
XL. THE TIMID BRIDEGROOM	300
XLI. GARDENS OF ALLAH	303
XLII. "ALFONSO'S" BRIDES	309
XLIII. "BABY'S" NARROW ESCAPE	316
XLIV. SOME ENGLISHMEN	324
XLV. SOME AMERICANS	334
XLVI. PRINCE SIXTE	339
XLVII. ROMAN RUINS	342
XLVIII. MOTHER AND BROTHER	346
XLIX. PILGRIM'S PROGRESS	355
L. THE GREAT LITTLE MAHATMA	360
LI. CLOSED CHAPTER	370
LII. TURMOIL	373

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

THE AUTHOR	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	FACING PAGE
THE SHEIKH-EL-ARAB	48
THE AGHA WITH HIS FALCON	49
VIEW FROM THE GARDEN, LOOKING NORTH	64
HAAFA AND ZORA	65
DICK SAILS A RAFT ON THE SPRING FLOODS	88
"PETER PAN" IN THE SAHARA!	88
TWO VIEWS OF THE GARDEN	89
THE SHEIKH-EL-ARAB'S FALCONER	176
MARGARET SHERIDAN AND TWO SHEIKHS WHO ACTED IN OUR FILM BURLESQUE	177
AUTHOR AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE <i>gourbi</i>	192
TWO VIEWS OF THE COURTYARD	193
AUTHOR AND THE STUDIO BUILDING	296
FRONT AND SIDE VIEWS OF THE HOUSE	297
MARGARET SHERIDAN, PATRICK BALFOUR, AND THE FORD	336
ROMAN RUINS AT DIANA VETERANORUM	337
EL-OUED, THE CITY IN THE SANDS	352
MAHATMA GANDHI	353

FOREWORD

THE reason this book has come to be written is pure chance. I was asked one day why I had compressed eight years of Saharan life into one short chapter at the end of *Nuda Veritas*.

The fact was that *Nuda Veritas* had surpassed the limit of words allowed by my publisher, and those eight years were a book in themselves.

Then came the suggestion: "Why not write that book?"

It had never occurred to me that it was worth writing.

My village with its sick and needy, its pride, prejudices and passions, its rogues and ruffians, generosity and stoicism seemed to me as any other village, plus a tame murderer or two. A camel seemed as normal a method of transport as a Green Line bus.

I had come to regard my eight years in Africa as waste of time, eight years that had to be cut clean out of my life. Nor did I realise its unusual elements until my return to England, when reporters interviewed me about "ADVENTURE," as if life isn't a great adventure no matter where you live it. Adventure isn't a fact, it's an attitude of mind. Perhaps my greatest adventure was—but no, I must reserve that for the last chapter, although it has no connection

ARAB INTERLUDE

with this Arab interlude. No—don't look at the end! Live with me first my Arab life, let me introduce to you one by one my Arab friends.

Biskra is no outlandish place, it is a land that everybody knows. Tourists come and go. Tourists! Millions have been to Biskra, have brought home snapshots of the picturesque white crowds, a crowd which in the tourist's sight was just a crowd dressed all in white, and it was nothing more. But come with me along the sunbaked road that leads from the town of Biskra to the village of M'cid. See the Arabs going home to the village at sunset ; they walk singly or in groups, they ride bicycles, mules, donkeys ; they salute as they pass, wishing us "good evening," and I will tell you about their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters, their nieces and their cousins. Maybe I can tell you more than they know themselves about their homes. I want you to see my village and to know it as you'd know your own. Perhaps you are not interested in the love-affairs of your gardener, your cook, your cook's daughter, your gardener's widow and orphan, you wouldn't write about them, or if you did you think no one would read it. Maybe, only human nature being what it is loves the forbidden thing. The door that is perpetually locked you want to open. The wall that is so high provokes in you a desire to look over the top. A curtained window is interesting after dark when it is lit up from within. But if this makes it more amusing for you it accentuates the problem for me.

A native community in a little Saharan oasis may seem to be negligible enough. Why shouldn't I

FOREWORD

open wide their doors? Unveil their women? Initiate you into their private lives, their tragedies, and their distorted values? What can it matter?

But it does matter. They have taken me into their confidence. They have trusted me as perhaps no foreigner, no European has been trusted before. If I betray that trust they will surely know it, for there are Europeans at Biskra who will tell them. Tourists, book in hand, COULD (and surely would) inquire for this one and that, for the murderer, the blackmailer, the tyrant, the lover, all those whose names are printed on the page. Guides would point them out. The Arab cafetier in the little wayside café, the carpet seller, the hotel porter, all would know the names, and I, who would like to see my friends again, could never return, to face the resentment, the hatred, the vengeance perhaps, that my reappearance among them would release. And so I have to choose between discretion and disguise.

Discretion would rob me of much precious material. I have chosen disguise, and trust my players are well concealed behind their masks. For some, the mask means life and death.

CHAPTER I

How we came to Algiers

WE were on a tramp steamer, having abandoned the home we had made in Constantinople. A feverish wanderlust urged me, as so often, to seek new climes. The children had seemed, as ever, excited by the change. Asia lay on our left, Europe on our right, and we were heading for North Africa. To start for somewhere, anywhere, by ship, rail, aeroplane, motor or camel, was drug-like to me. On! On to the next! Adventure and mystery lay beyond. . . .

That evening I found Margaret in her cabin. She quickly closed the copy-book in which she was writing. I knew it was her diary, which I was never allowed to see, and as she seemed prepared to defend it I said nothing, but determined to read the explanation of her red eyes. I looked for it when both children were safely on deck, absorbed in the manœuvres of an Italian submarine as we passed the island of Stromboli. It was then that I learned all that she and Dick thought and felt but never said. Tears of lamentation over a beloved dog that had been left behind, an Angora goat that had been fed from a bottle, the tortoises that we had collected on the Asia hills and brought back to our Bosphorus garden. The garden they had planted. The waterfall they would never see again. The bathing-pool where the wash from the steamers used

ARAB INTERLUDE

to splash them. The Greek boatman who taught them to row. The Turkish cook who made sweet-meats for them, and the final summing up:

"We left a dog we loved in Germany, an ant-eater in Mexico, a parrot in California, always we have to say good-bye to the things we love. There is no home for us."

Very thoughtfully I returned on deck. "There is no home for us," was written before my eyes, no matter where I looked. Was this the children's reaction to all our adventures? Yet other children would love to do what mine were doing. "Yes, children with a home," answered my conscience, for then I realised that a home is a human desire. Only mature grown-ups who have suffered and become philosophical, for whom material possessions are nothing, could live as I lived and love it. But my children had not learnt the vanity of things. They were like young plants trying to throw out strong roots, and those roots were being constantly cut for transplantation.

I talked to Margaret later: "Were you sorry to leave?"

She answered sadly: "I don't think I can ever love any place again. I've loved so many times, it hurts so."

"Perhaps," I said, "you could love just once again?"

She did not think so.

When we landed in Algiers I did not know a single soul. General Mougin, the representative of France at Angora—himself an Algerian—had described to

HOW WE CAME TO ALGIERS

me in glowing terms "the white city" as the French call it, "the city of Light" (La Ville Lumière). Full of colour, flowers, romance, it combined he said, all the advantages of French civilisation and oriental glamour.

I had loved Turkey and all that was Turkish. I had acquired a smattering of oriental history and art. My eye had accustomed itself to Persian *faience*, Adrianople furniture and the influence of Venice. I had grown to appreciate Moslem geometrical designs, carpets, embroideries and miniatures. I could even appraise Arab calligraphy. There were artists who specialised in writing verses of the Koran as an artist paints a picture. I knew who had designed the great window in the Mosque Sulimanieh. I had a passion for Turkish minarets and tombstones.

General Mougin forgot this when he selected for me the only part of Africa that was a desert inhabited by nomadic tribes, devoid of any tradition except that of destruction.

I shall never forget my disillusion over the "White City." Recalling the exquisite silhouette of Stamboul with its forest of minarets like spears piercing the sky, I wept, but I could not go back, for it is expensive to change one's plans when one has $2\frac{1}{2}$ tons of luggage.

Viewing Algiers from the opaque greyness of London in November, I can appreciate now the gardened city with white villas smothered in bougainvillea and plumbago; the cloudless background of blue and the white-draped figures among the palm trees.

But I landed in a spirit of revolt.

ARAB INTERLUDE

I must have written Mougin a savage letter, for he resigned his appointment as Commander-in-Chief of the Army in Algeria, leaving me "high and dry" so to speak, and friendless. He had himself transferred to Morocco, and I heard no more of him for five years.

There was nothing for it but to find a villa and settle down, at least for a time. After searching I found one in a village on the southern outskirts of the town.

It was unpretentious, imitation Moorish, pleasantly picturesque and situated in a garden. The proprietors were the local postmaster and his wife, who planned to retire there on a pension in a year's time.

They were perhaps typical of the French middle-classes. Madame Miené, homely and inquisitive, shuffled about her post office in felt slippers and shawl. In her spare time she preserved quince and oranges, made wine from the home-grown grapes and collected cats. Monsieur Miené wore an impressive beard and would have made an effective President of the Republic. His passion was flowers, and he inserted a clause in our lease enabling him to retain the freedom of the garden.

I mention all this because it was the prelude to our Saharan life, and plays a part in the construction of the general design.

My sculpture was a matter of wonderment to Madame Miené, and occasionally she asked if she might bring friends to see it. It was evident that not my sculpture alone, but that I myself was a matter of curiosity. Her friends took me in from the top of my head to the tips of my shoes. They stared

HOW WE CAME TO ALGIERS

so they could find no words. They reviewed furniture, books, ornaments, photographs, peeped furtively into bedrooms and kitchen, the while Madame Miené explained where we came from and how we lived.

Experience had taught me caution, and I was careful not to divulge the identity of Lenin's bust. Madame Miené had a great preference for him. Did he not remind them—she asked her friend—of "*ce cher vieux Gaston*"? "And who," I asked, "was Gaston?" She explained that he had owned the *épicerie* in the village and died last year. I hardly knew which to pity most: Lenin, for looking like the *épicier*, or Gaston, who doubtless would have turned in his grave at the thought of even looking like Lenin!

From the villa it was about twenty minutes' walk over the hill to the girls' Lycée. This was a Moorish palace, built by a German firm, designed as an hotel and confiscated by the Government at the outbreak of war. It stood in beautiful grounds and commanded a view of the coast for miles. The *Directrice* suggested that Dick as well as Margaret should attend. Dick was then ten years old. She thought he would learn French quicker among the girls than among the boys. The popularity he subsequently acquired gave him a taste for female companionship that has remained with him ever since. All this at a cost of eleven pounds sterling *a year*, with the midday meal thrown in. The pound had attained 182 francs (instead of 75 as to-day). There seemed to be some truth after all in what Mougin had said about the advantages of French civilisation.

As the villa was empty I had to buy furniture. In

ARAB INTERLUDE

the Arab quarter I found an antiquary who seemed to appreciate my discrimination in things oriental. The little Moorish house belonging to the postmaster was gradually transformed.

Naoui, the antiquary, arrived every Sunday morning accompanied by an Arab carrying a brass tray, a silver mirror, a carved chest, a Syrian chair. . . . His visit coinciding one day with a domestic crisis, I consulted him as to cooks. The Mienés had recommended an Italian, but she came only on the days when she found nothing better to do. The Spanish girl flew into uncontrollable tempers for no reason. French workers seemed to be non-existent in the French colony.

Naoui sent me his cousin Mabrouk, which means "lucky." The Mienés were appalled. They assured me that all Arabs were filthy, lazy, thieves and liars. They viewed Mabrouk with grave disapproval and never ceased to warn me of impending danger.

Mabrouk indeed was dirty, and occasionally he drank, but drink only made him sleepy. He was touchingly devoted and absolutely honest. One day, with moist eyes, he told me he was my slave for ever, that wherever I might decide to go he would go too.

Naoui would turn up even when he had nothing to bring me, merely to satisfy himself that Mabrouk was behaving as he should. Then one day he invited me to have tea with his wife. They lived in a tenement in the Arab quarter. The tenement was an old Turkish house with columned loggias on four sides of an inner courtyard. When we arrived, there was a babel of female voices; a crowd of gaily dressed

HOW WE CAME TO ALGIERS

women were leaning over the balustrade. The sudden appearance of a "*Roumia*" (as non-Moslem foreigners are called, it means *Roman* and dates back to the conquest) was a matter of considerable excitement, but as soon as Naoui appeared everyone fled. I noticed at the same time that Naoui kept his eyes on his feet until he was safely in his own room. The tenement method of housing is complicated for men who may not see the faces of their neighbours' wives.

Ayesha was young and very pretty, dressed in gay silks with a fringed turban, and many bangles and anklets. The room was clean and bare. We sat on the floor and coffee was served on a low painted table. The main feature was a big four-post bed draped in pink silk and muslin.

Ayesha took me up on to the roof, where we were able to talk a little without restraint. I was absurdly ignorant of Arab customs. In Turkey women had been recently emancipated. I had read Pierre Loti's novels, which seemed exaggerated and absurd. One had seen films with ludicrous harem scenes, but when Ayesha in answer to my questioning told me that she never left the tenement, I was incredulous.

"How about marketing?"

She shook her head: "My husband does the marketing."

"How about clothes?"

"My husband chooses them."

"But what about air and exercise?"

She looked at me in surprise and burst out laughing.

I was to learn all there was to be known about Arab women's lives in the next few years.

CHAPTER II

How we came to Biskra

WE had been living for six months in this Algerian villa, when Dick was laid low with typhoid fever, and Margaret—rather conveniently—was invited to visit an aunt on the Riviera.

For days I sat on the balcony of Dick's room reading Keyserling's *Travel Diary*. The only friend I had in Algiers was the Prince of Annam. He was a prisoner of the French, had fought bravely as a boy emperor to preserve the independence of his kingdom and been defeated. He was a sculptor of talent, a landscape painter and a delightful philosopher. He wore his pigtail in a knob under his turban, which gave him a feminine silhouette, although his face was like an old Chinese parchment print. He had helped to make my Algiers life tolerable. With him I had seen much that was worth while. He would fetch me in his car and drive me to Roman ruins along the coast. We picnicked in the wood of the old Trappist monastery. We talked philosophy while the children sea-bathed. He remains in my memory one of the most distinguished, intelligent and exquisite personalities I ever met.

When Dick was ill he came to see me and advised "BIKRA" (he never pronounced an S) for his recuperation. For Biskra therefore we entrained, as soon as Dick was strong enough to travel.

HOW WE CAME TO BISKRA

I had always heard of Biskra. Robert Hichens had talked to me about it when I was a girl. It was the place that in my romantic youth I longed to live in. *The Garden of Allah* had put it on the map. My mother had made a scene when she discovered I had read the book. I was too young, she thought, to know about such things as the Ouled Naïl dancing-girls! I re-read that chapter carefully, but failed to understand it. Times have changed. My daughter in her teens has taken our English friends there at night to see the sight.

The very first thing we did on arrival was to ask the hotel porter how one could get to the desert. It is the unfailing question that every tourist asks. Some of them ask it on the quay at Algiers when they get off the ship. Americans especially are disappointed when they learn there is not time to see it during the few hours the ship is in harbour.

The hotel porter advised a taxi. I did not feel somehow that a taxi was the appropriate conveyance in which to make one's first acquaintance with the desert, and Dick was not strong enough to ride a camel. So we accepted the services of a four-post bed on wheels, drawn by two emaciated foul-smelling horses. It wasn't their fault that they were foul, and I was sorry for them, especially when I began to realise the distance and the condition of the roads.

Presently the high earthen walls that enclose palm gardens ceased. The palm trees became sparser, they seemed to be growing wild, to belong to no one in particular. They leaned and twisted, bunched all different ways and heights, silhouetted fantastically

ARAB INTERLUDE

against a uniform drop-scene. How often one had seen it, that stage-prop called the desert.

We leapt from the carriage, telling it to wait while we walked—walked—walked——

We pretended to ourselves that there wasn't any carriage waiting, that we hadn't that afternoon arrived by train, that we weren't wearing civilised clothes. We walked due south as if Dick hadn't been ill and we meant to reach the South Pole. We carried our hats in our hands, and the wind—yes, I think there was a wind that day—ruffled our hairs. At all events our hairs were ruffled. We undid things at the neck, shirts and ties, and rolled up sleeves to the elbow. We must have looked quite absurd. I remember that I longed to be out of sight of that coachman in a turban, sitting on his box. He wore a filthy turban and he was blind in one eye. That is to say, like many Arabs, he had an eye that was simply grey without any pupil. However that might be, I felt his seeing eye fixed on our backs as we went further and further away. But it would be many hours before we could hope to be out of his sight, and unless he drove his drooping horses out across the sand to meet us we would have to retrace our steps facing him all the way. But it was no use thinking about him, or what he thought. What did it matter anyway? Darn him! So finally we sat down on the sand and took it in our hands, which we'd been wanting to do all along. It was finer than any sand on any sea-shore. So fine, so dry, so white and shiny! It trickled through our fingers like water.

Dick and I decided then and there, that as soon as

HOW WE CAME TO BISKRA

he had recovered his strength we would take camels and go out into the desert. We would spend days and nights and weeks in the desert. We would go back to Algiers by a desert route. We would ride our camels until the desert was no more, until the mountains that separate the desert from the sea arrest all further camel progress.

"We'll go into the desert; we'll go on and on——"

It was a solemn promise we made to one another, and it was an incentive to Dick to get well quick.

That night the Bash Agha¹ Bouaziz Ben Gana, to whom I had a letter of introduction, invited us to dine. This made rather an impression, I noticed, on the hall porter. The Bash Agha seemed to count for something. The negro who was ordered to show us the way had a peculiarly deferential manner. It felt like going to dine with royalty.

We had travelled all night and been out into the desert, Dick was still weak from his illness and should have gone to bed. But whenever there was anything worth while to be done, we did it in company, and we both thought the Bash Agha's dinner invitation was worth while. His house stood back from a quiet road and was surrounded by an enclosed garden and by an outer row of buildings. Looking down the ilex avenue one saw a big white archway leading to his courtyard. It was brilliantly lit up. There were groups of natives standing and squatting around the archway. One of them rose to greet us and led us to a door.

¹ A little later he assumed the high dignity of "SHEIKH-EL-ARAB."

ARAB INTERLUDE

The Bash Agha, wearing a black cloth burnous embroidered with gold, and orange leather riding-boots, received us. He reminded me of the picture in the National Gallery, by Bellini, of Mohammed the Conqueror: face of carved ivory, deep-sunk eyes, hawk nose, trim black beard, overwhelming dignity.

The walls of the long narrow room were hung from top to bottom with spangled veils, carpets, embroideries, swords, guns. Tables were covered with carpets and brass trays. Infinitely meretricious and cheap were these details, but colourful and rich in general effect.

It was a semi-official occasion; the Bash Agha was entertaining some French officers and the local French doctor, and had assembled some members of his family. I was rather bewildered; the Arabs all seemed so tall, handsome, and elegant, so thoroughly cinematographish and unreal.

There was a feeling of constraint. The nephews and cousins spoke in subdued whispers. I was to learn in time that the presence of the great Chief always effected a kind of paralysis. The only one who seemed unperturbed and on a status of equality was the Bash Agha's cousin, the Agha Aïssa. I will not try to describe him. He was so absurdly romantic, a "movie" sheikh. When some mention was made of tourists I burst into a deprecating remark. There was silence and he fixed laughing eyes on me:

"And what are you, Madame?"

He thought I was just one of those who passed through and passes on to be no more seen.

As long as we remained at Biskra, the Bash Agha

HOW WE CAME TO BISKRA

extended a permanent invitation to us for every meal. Dick was invited to play football with his sons. Doubtless this was the appropriate pastime for an English boy, but Dick had never played football in his life, and I had difficulty in inducing him to be civil to the Bash Agha's sons. (There were a great many, both younger and older than Dick.) When Dick is bored he shows it—and the eldest son, whose passion seemed to be football, bored him quite a lot. But he enjoyed a lamb roasted entire, carried in on a brass tray, its mouth stuffed with orange blossom. It was placed on a separate table around which we all solemnly stood like vultures and picked off the meat with our fingers. Dick thought it a perfect system. The Arabs, unlike us, tear mutton off a carcass with great elegance. Afterwards a servant pours rose-water over our hands into a silver bowl. The dinner consisted of seven courses. The champagne was sweet and the colour of a blood orange.

The next day Agha Aïssa invited us to go for a drive with him in his car. We waited for him all the afternoon; he arrived at five in a large limousine which he drove himself. After a few kilometres a frightful smell of burning rubber reminded him that he had forgotten to take the brake off! It was typical of Arab driving.

We spent most of our days in what is vulgarly called "The Garden of Allah," which is the garden Hichens described on the fringe of the desert. It is walled in and full of palms, rare shrubs, and little shady paths. The main stream, which is the life of Biskra, serpentines and cascades, making a pleasant

ARAB INTERLUDE

sound. While I read Walt Whitman, Dick made boats of cactus leaves and floated them down the little waterways.

Count Landon, to whom the garden belonged when Hichens wrote about it, went back to France at the outbreak of war and never returned. After the War he made it over to his niece, the Comtesse de Ganay. But the Comtesse had no fancy for Africa, so the garden was exploited touristically for its upkeep. One paid three francs, and it was a safe refuge from beggars and guides.

Occasionally Aïssa would come and join us there. If he was feeling really energetic he came on horseback. He rode a shiny black animal that ambled nervously or walked on its hind-legs, its tail sweeping the dust. Aïssa sat imperturbably in his high-backed embroidered saddle with a Velasquez air.

When Dick told Aïssa that we meant to settle in the oasis he smiled as one who had heard the story before.

I had almost immediately realised that everything ugly, odious and banal began and ended with the town. The oasis was beautiful, full of mystery and quietude. The high walls of the village street contained all the answers to all my questions about Arab life. The faces of the Arabs in the villages were different to those of the town. The country Arabs held themselves proudly, they looked you straight between the eyes. They were courteous and never importunate.

A hundred thousand date palms towered above the

HOW WE CAME TO BISKRA

garden walls. From a camel's back I could look down into those gardens and see the orange trees laden with fruit. It was now the end of February. Spring, which lasts but a few days, was in the air. Pomegranate bushes were bursting into tender leaf. The vivid new green of myriad fig trees recalled Italy that I had loved.

I wanted to stay, I wanted to live in a garden full of date palms and fig trees, pomegranates and oranges. I thought I had found the place I'd been searching for for years. I thought I wanted peace.

CHAPTER III

Artery of the Oasis

THE oasis can be likened to a tapestry through which gleams a silver thread. That thread is the *seguia* or stream to which the oasis owes its very existence. Its source? Shameful admission, I never explored it. Seemingly it had its beginning in the public garden of Biskra town, near where the railway ends; *ends . . .* for Biskra is the terminus of civilisation. There the little stream began its life-giving trek through the public garden, then through a tunnel, and so across the garden of Caïd Ali, a cousin of the Bash Agha (what a garden Ali could have had, and I tried to make it for him, but that is a later story), along a deep, narrow, open drain through the Arab quarter, and so, under the main road, to the "Village Nègre," where one preferred not to follow it, and where one tried not to imagine its fate. The end of the nigger village was also the end of the town. From here the stream was free to flow in its open winding bed between clumps of palm trees, and although Arabs came here to do their washing, the stream regained its purity as it serpentineed through the big, carefully tended "Garden of Allah." This was the beginning of its big work of irrigation; from the Garden of Allah to each and every other "garden" in the oasis, until it reached the desert. But the mere

ARTERY OF THE OASIS

fact of passing through a garden did not mean life to that garden. It required to be dammed and to overflow. It passed through a garden so to speak on trust. If the owner of the first garden on its path had been free to overflow it at his will, there would have been no more water for anyone else. It was therefore submitted to a system of partition. Every evening, at a certain spot on the road near the village of M'cid, the villagers met and discussed the next day's water plan. There were water buyers and water sellers. One could hire the stream by the hour, or buy hours.

The value of a piece of land depended entirely upon the amount of water that went with it. Even a big piece of land without water was of no value. The rich Arabs were those who owned plenty of "hours," and who could not only irrigate their palm trees and vegetables in the hottest summer months, but who had a surplus that others could hire. A landowner whose water might consist of no more than four hours a week would lend his four hours to someone who needed a surplus, and in return would receive eight hours one day a fortnight. A few hours was insufficient for watering a big garden; the water would merely soak into the earth and be lost before it could reach the further limits. It required a good strong rush of water to cover a big area. It was naturally to a garden's advantage that the stream should pass through it, even when it was not irrigating, for although one was in honour bound not to tap it on an off day, one could dip one's bucket in as much as one liked. The landowner whose water had to

ARAB INTERLUDE

pass through other gardens before it reached his own was at a disadvantage, for there was inevitable evaporation. The lucky one was he whose garden (like the one I eventually owned) was next to the sluice. *Water* was the origin (and woman) of most of the deathly fights. If it were known that a man had deliberately opened his dam and let someone else's water flow into his garden out of his turn, he might be knifed by the man who had a right to that water. I often listened to water discussions (they happened just outside my gate). They were almost always acrimonious. Occasionally an Arab would throw another into the stream by way of settling a dispute.

Its work done, the *segui*a pursued its channel across the open desert for the benefit of Nomads and their flocks, until it came to a little isolated oasis called Kora, about five or six kilometres south of Biskra.

If I have described somewhat laboriously this water system it is because I have been asked about it so often, and people who do not know Egypt, where I believe the system is the same, have no idea of water values. In the Southern oases, nearly every garden has its well, but such is not the case in Biskra, and the fact of having to share a stream has a distinct effect upon the psychology of the inhabitants. It sets a certain standard of honour and honesty of co-operation and fraternity. Water is everybody's business. It is life itself. But I must add, for the sake of those whose hygienic sensitiveness is aroused, that there exists a second water supply, in its way just as

ARTERY OF THE OASIS

jealously guarded. It is not for irrigation but for drinking and domestic use, described as *town* water. It reaches the villages through small underground pipes, and whoever installs a water tap has to pay a water charge, and as it is impossible to prevent an Arab from attaching a rubber pipe to it and letting it flow permanently into his garden, the municipal authorities turn off the supply during certain hours.

There was a good deal of grumbling. The village people complained that the big hotels took more than their share. In those days (1927) the hotels were full during the winter season. Since then the world crisis and depreciation of sterling and dollar have affected the tourist trade to such an extent that the great international Caravanserais stand empty. Owing to the international crisis Biskra has become a much nicer place, and the town Arabs are reverting to something approaching Saharan decency. For, like every Eastern people, Arabs are ruined by contact with Westernism. The idea of the West "civilising" the East is a fallacy. In the South, where they have hardly any contact with Europeans, the Arabs are a splendid race. The nearer they get to the coast, the more do they degenerate. If Biskra town was hateful on account of its guides, the guides were hateful because the tourists had made them so.

Two books, *The Garden of Allah* and *The Sheikh*, obsessed touristic minds. The guides played up to this romanticism of Nordic women, and decked themselves out richly so that when a fair tourist inquired, "Where is the Sheikh?" he could answer, "Madame, I am the Sheikh!"

ARAB INTERLUDE

There was one great offender who wore a silk *geynour* (turban) and invested in a second-hand sky-blue burnous embroidered in gold. He was nicknamed "Oh-la-la"; his real name was Lahla. He could produce a negro wedding, horses to ride, a caravan in the desert, tame gazelle, sluigi dogs, feneks, or an Arab meal at his house—in fact he specialised in Arab "colour." The walls of his room were plastered with photographs of English beauties whom he had entertained, and he always had a letter from England folded small in his embroidered pocket-book that he begged one to translate for him. If one is a tourist one cannot dispense with a guide. I tried to, but without success: when I consulted the Bash Agha about returning to Algiers as far as camels could take me, he laughed.

"One night in the desert will give you all the sensation you want. Get the Transatlantique Hotel to arrange it for you, over there in the dunes, just outside the oasis." He would not understand why anyone should want to trek into the desert, enduring unnecessary discomforts. "When you've seen it one day, all the other days will be the same. When you've slept a night in camp, all the other nights will be like the first night."

And so I had to take the hotel porter into my confidence, and he called in Lahla, who invited me to take coffee on a carpet spread on the ground in front of his friend's trash shop for tourists. A tame gazelle licked my hand, while Lahla in a low confidential voice assured me that I was no ordinary tourist, that he had recognised the woman in a million

ARTERY OF THE OASIS

that I was. I could trust him, even if no one else could. He would never exploit me—the price would be reasonable, the escort reliable. There would be four camels and three Nomads.

All this was new to me, and although I was very trusting I bethought me that rather than place myself in the hands of three totally strange Nomads who could not speak French, I would take one with me whom I knew, so I paid the journey from Algiers of Naoui the antiquary. When I told Lahla that the Arab from Algiers was coming he looked perturbed. I did not realise the poor opinion the Arab of the desert has of the Arab of the town. Even Lahla, the tourist guide, a low creature in the eyes of desert Arabs, was superior to the Algiers shopkeeper. Lahla's disapproval irritated me, but when on the eve of our departure Naoui arrived reeking of absinthe and dressed in cheap European clothes, I felt sick at heart. Why had I done this thing? Naoui was utterly alien in the Biskra background. I longed to send him back, but it was not possible.

CHAPTER IV

By Camel

THE morning of our departure a crowd from the hotel assembled to see us start, and to photograph us. Word had gone round that we were embarking on an expedition that was not quite usual. We were going to make our way as the crow flies, in a direct line from Biskra due west to Ghardaia. There was not even a caravan route. We were going to pioneer our own trail. I looked at the three Nomads to whom we were entrusting our lives. They were extremely poor, dressed almost in rags. Cessi, our chief, was an oldish man, almost venerable and burnt very dark. He had a thin, hard, well-bred face, eyes that seemed to pierce through one, and an air of simple dignity. Ahmed was nondescript, smiling and kindly. Daragi, a handsome blond lad, was of no account; his duty was to mind the camels. Whereas the other two carried muzzle-loading rifles, Daragi carried a long reed flute. Dick and I disguised our European silhouettes beneath white burnouses. The only blot on the landscape was Naoui from Algiers. He sat on his camel as though he were an ambulating tinker. The Nomads looked at him, but their faces betrayed no opinion. At the last moment I confided my misgivings to Lahla "I'm so afraid he drinks!"

"He does," admitted Lahla. "He's loaded a case of absinthe on to his camel——"

"I hope we shan't have trouble."

"I'll warn Cessi to look out."

"Naoui has a revolver."

"Don't worry, the Nomads will settle him if he gives trouble."

Agha Aïssa, attended by his big negro, turned up to wish us a good journey. The hotel crowd made the most of him and photographed him from every angle. "A REAL SHEIKH!"

He accompanied us on horseback to the end of the oasis, his mare pulling nervously at sight of the open desert.

I reminded him: "We're coming back. We're going to live here—we're going to settle."

And Dick corroborated: "We're coming back, Aïssa."

And Aïssa's smile was half laughter as he answered "Insha'Allah!" (if God wills). He then invoked Allah's blessing on our journey, turned his horse about and headed for home. The hoofs pounded the hard sand and sent it flying in clouds. Behind him thundered the negro on the bay. The sound of the following horse excited Aïssa's mare. She tossed her head back and up, and from side to side. Foam flew, and wind filled Aïssa's burnous like a ship's sail. . . .

When we pitched camp at sunset Biskra was out of sight, but the Atlas mountains were still in view. It would take us three days, the Nomads said, to lose those mountains.

It was cold after the sun set; we piled on every woollen cardigan and scarf we could under our fur coats. Daragi let the camels graze and collected scrub. Ahmed lit a fire while Cessi prepared supper. Naoui

ARAB INTERLUDE

sat apart and poured something out of a bottle into a glass. He looked on cynically while the Nomads said their evening prayer. The "civilised" Arab, although proud of being a Moslem, had long since ceased to pray.

After supper we talked round the camp-fire, and Naoui was useful as interpreter. The camels had been made to kneel down in the family circle, the fire lit up their arrogant faces. Dick asked Daragi his age. Daragi did not know; he was born, he said, "the year of the snows," by which one deduced that snow had actually, some eighteen years back, fallen at Biskra.

"And you, Cessi, when were you born?"

"The year of the Americans."

No amount of questioning could reveal whether the first American came to Biskra the year Cessi was born.

"And you?" Cessi asked, looking at me. I hesitated. "I—was born the year of the eclipse!" It was a shot at random, but satisfactory because indisputable.

"And Dick?"

"Dick was born the year of the War."

"The first year?"

"No, the second."

This elicited inquiries about his father. The Arabs have scant regard for a woman who has no husband, but a widow is an object of respect. My singleness, which had puzzled them, was explained at last. As though to dispel a little cloud of sadness that memories had evoked, Cessi borrowed Daragi's reed flute and began to play something that resembled Debussy's *Petit berger*.

One's first night in the desert is unforgettable.

The silence! The awesome silence, as though a great cataclysm were impending.

We were up before dawn drinking hot chocolate by the light of a waning moon. I was thankful for a fur coat, and for the hot cup round which to warm my hands. Meanwhile the tent was being dismantled; the camels grunted and groaned resentfully as they were loaded.

Off we started on foot, all of us, to get warm. Gradually the moon faded and there was a golden glow in the east. Soon the sun rose in fiery fierceness; the shadows cast by little tufts of alfa grass were yards long. Had ever a camel such long legs as described by his shadow at sunrise?

One by one, coats and scarves were flung off. The warmth of the day had begun, and we mounted our camels. At ten o'clock we halted. I flung myself down with my burnous over a thyme bush for pillow and was asleep in a second.

Ten minutes later we had to be off again. Cessi had worked out a schedule and meant us to keep to it. If we lingered we should run short of water.

There is no sameness about the desert, every day it varies. One may be travelling over a sandy surface one day, the next it is flinty and rough, or it may be covered with scrub. On our fourth day we followed an *oued* (a dried-up river) full of white broom bushes that filled the hot air with scent. The camels tore at them as they passed, and would have stopped to browse had not Daragi urged them on. In between playing his flute he called them names and talked to them harshly. Nine hours a day riding a camel, and the

ARAB INTERLUDE

extreme temperatures of day and night, knocked the stuffing out of me. I ran a fever, and when the valley of silver broom brought us to a little deserted oasis, I fell rather than slid off my camel, and found myself lying inertly where I had landed. Dick was rather concerned; he decided I could not go on and that we should pitch camp where we were. Cessi demurred: if we delayed we would run short of mineral water. Only Arabs could drink the polluted water of the wells. Dick would listen to no argument and I was beyond caring. All I remember is an authoritative small boy of eleven telling Ahmed and Daragi to pitch the tents. How I got on to my camp bed I don't know, but it was like a cloud in heaven and I seemed to be floating. Our tents, Dick's and mine, were pitched under a bunch of date palms in a sweet green spot.

Dick went shooting with Cessi and Ahmed, leaving Naoui of Algiers to guard the camp and Daragi to watch the grazing camels. I slept—I slept during the remainder of the day, all that night and most of the next day. On the evening of the second day at sunset, I was awakened by a noise in the palm tree above my tent. Myriads of small birds had come to roost. Every time I turned in my bed they arose with a great fluttering of wings. The slightest sound or movement seemed to disturb them. They were extremely agitated when Dick came and sat by me to relate his day's hunting: He had walked a long way and the total bag was one hare! Cessi's old blunderbuss, that he loaded down the barrel, filled Dick with scorn and mirth. Killing anything was simply a

matter of chance. However, they had happened upon a Nomad encampment and been hospitably received. The shepherds had invited him to a *Meshui*, that is to say they offered to kill a sheep in his honour and roast it whole. As they were exceedingly poor he declined, making an excuse to get back to camp, but he did not escape the inevitable presents of goat cheese, butter, and dried dates. A bowl of sour sheep milk was passed round like a loving-cup. He was obliged to sip it like the rest, and it was indescribably nasty. The bowl was of dried goatskin that smelt and tasted of the tar with which it had been cured; big black goat hairs were floating in the milk. The children had crowded round him, full of curiosity. The little boys were practically naked and all had eye diseases. The shepherds offered him the hospitality of a tent if he would stay for a few days.

I could have stayed a long time in the little oasis if I had not felt that our water supply was running out like sand in an hour-glass. When Dick took our Nomads off hunting I was left in charge of the camp the loneliness was fascinating, but suddenly toward sunset from the sandy creeks emerged flocks and men. From behind hillocks they came in their hundreds, on every side, threading their way through the palm tree and broom bushes to the little stone-encircled well.

There were sheep, goats, camels, dogs, donkeys, women and children. The women were swathed in scarlet home-woven draperies, kept together with barbaric silver ornaments. They wore turbans, and their black hair was plaited with red woollen strands. Their sunburnt strong arms covered with silver bangle

ARAB INTERLUDE

—babies slung on their backs. The children were almost naked, and blinked sore eyes. The men's faces were hard, the faces of men who know no shade from the pitiless sun, and for whom life is a perpetual struggle for water and food. As in the days before the Romans, so are the Nomads still. Their lives have not changed. From father to son, generation after generation they tend their flocks in all seasons. They can neither read nor write: the life of the towns is unknown to them. Conquerors may come and go, governments may change, to them it is all the same: Roman—Turkish—French, it matters not. They are the watchers of sheep, and their food is milk and dates, their clothes are the wool of the sheep—and sometimes, when the rain does not fall in springtime, there is a famine, and then Allah have mercy on them!

At first the men looked at me suspiciously. Was I a man with long hair, or a woman in trousers? A woman of course: would a man care about babies, and baby camels and baby donkeys? There was no harm then in my talking to the women. One, wasted with fever, accepted quinine: a new-born child needed only boracic to save it from blindness. To requite me an old woman pressed a rabbit into my hand, a bleeding rabbit caught by a dog. I offered her some francs, but she refused: she meant not to receive but to give. But the children—they accepted the francs! Their fathers grinned with delight.

"How long will we stay here?" Cessi asked me at last.

"A little longer, Cessi!"

"Then we must buy a sheep, for we are running short of food."

He negotiated noisily with the head of the tribe. The man was obdurate. A hundred francs? But no, a hundred and twenty-five was the market price. A hundred and ten, said Cessi. The man got up in disgust and walked away. Cessi shouted after him: "You are not generous."

The man yielded at once: "Take it then—a hundred and ten francs." No Arab can bear to be told he is not generous.

Dick said they were the same people whose black camel-hair tents he came upon when he was shooting, they were the men who had pressed him to camp with them, promising to kill a sheep in his honour.

Food we now had in plenty, but mineral water, as Cessi predicted, was running short. After I had seen Nomads let down into the brackish depth of the well to fill up the skins, I had no intention of drinking the water. We were therefore obliged to push on, but with what regret!

Five more days of open desert lay before us, and no more wells upon our way. Day after day we moved monotonously forward, ever at the same pace, for a camel goes never slower and never faster. The rhythmic movement lulled me into a kind of comatose trance.

No variety of any kind to arrest the eye. Not a single mark upon the world's undulating surface—my mind was completely inactive. I thought of nothing except the next halt, the next food and the next sleep. I lived physically and I began to wonder whether intellectuality is not the basis of discontent, and whether living on the physical plane is not more

ARAB INTERLUDE

satisfactory after all! To sleep because one is weary, to eat because one is hungry. These were new sensations.

Each day was marked by an incident. Once we saw a man. He was alone, there was no camp in sight, no camel, no horse.

"He must be lost," I said.

"A Nomad never gets lost," answered Cessi with a suspicion of superiority.

"Let us ask him what he is doing."

We deviated slightly off our course to speak to him. He greeted us as if he were accustomed to see hundreds of people a day. He had left his caravan, he said, and retraced his tracks of the day before to look for a dagger he had dropped. A needle in a hay-stack would have seemed simple in comparison.

Another day we met two tramps with a small donkey. They were clothed in shreds. One of them was very old: he seemed to be incapable of thought or speech, he trudged painfully along, his eyes staring at the horizon.

As the donkey could never have carried sufficient food and water for such a journey, one can but suppose the shepherds whose camps they passed took care of them on their way.

I filled the old man's wizened hand with coin. He was too surprised to utter words, but sat down in the sand to count his unexpected fortune. I looked back several times and saw him still bent over his little pile. Allah had of course bestowed it, I was but the instrument of Allah.

The day before we were due to reach Guerara we

ran out of water, in spite of the fact that we had carefully cut down our allowance. Of the well water in the cask there was sufficient only for one man.

It was a burning day. The sun beat down upon us. Our throats were parched, our lips swollen, our tongues like leather. Dick was allowed to fill his mouth with the cask water on condition he did not swallow it.

We came upon some flocks whose shepherd waylaid us. His comrade, he said, who should have joined him the day before and brought him water, had not arrived; could we spare him a drink? The cask was none of my concern, it belonged to the men, they gave it to this stranger to the last drop——

"That was good of you," I said to Cessi.

He answered: "Any one of us might be in the same predicament."

When at last the long dark line that was the oasis of Guerara came in sight, a shout went up. Columbus sighting the New World could not have experienced a greater thrill than our little party in sight of the oasis. Even the camels seemed to hurry their pace.

As we neared the town an Arab galloped up to us and saluted.

"From Biskra? The Caïd expected you several days ago, he was getting anxious."

How could the Caïd know that we were overdue, or indeed that we were due at all? I never knew. The Arab on his horse went on his way. News travels fast in the desert and it is useless to ask why or how.

As we approached Guerara the sun was setting. Long lines of goats were being led into the walled

ARAB INTERLUDE

city, as it seemed by innumerable Pied Pipers. The cloud of dust that followed them reflected the golden sun-rays. The town seemed to be floating in an opalescent cloud. Such a town! On a hill encircled by a high mud wall, as high as any mediaeval fortress, and punctuated by great tower gateways, surmounted by pinnacles. At the top of the hill the high square minaret of a mosque dominated all. Beyond extended the green palmery, from which emanated a strange rhythmic sound in a variety of keys. This music was from hundreds of wells that creaked and groaned and sighed and sang. A donkey or a camel walked backwards and forwards drawing the rope that raised the water gourd from the depths.

No stranger may sleep within the walls, and a little guest-house with a *façade* of arcades stands hospitably beside the main gateway. Dick and I were the only strangers, and the hotel opened its shutters and its doors for us. It was clean and simple, just sufficiently European to be a haven to the weary traveller, and yet not a blot upon the memory of the journey.

Until darkness fell I stood upon the veranda fascinated, watching the people returning to the town from their labours in the palmery. A community far removed from the turmoil of the world, unmoved by world events, living as it had always lived, as it always will live, self-contained, struggling with poverty. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be in Guerara!

The next day our arrival was known all over the town. The Caïd came and squatted in the sand before the hotel door and plied me with questions. What

was it like over there, in the great world, in the great town of Biskra so full of life and movement?

"Here one hardly lives," he sighed, "it is so quiet." Too quiet even for a Saharan!

The story-teller assembled a crowd for our benefit. Although I understood not a word, he directed the flow of his talk towards me. The crowd enjoyed the story, grunting and laughing at intervals, and whispering comment among themselves. In the market-place all bargaining was suspended while "the travellers from Biskra" did their shopping. Ahmed had to have a new burnous, Daragi a new *gondourah* (shirt); Cessi bought stores for the remainder of our journey.

After a thirty-six hours' rest we started off again and ran into a Norther. Rain is unexpected in the Sahara, but we got it!

When we had trekked for half a day I begged Cessi to pitch camp and let us dry ourselves. The old man would not hear of it.

"We must keep on if we are to reach Ghardaia."

In vain I protested that it was unimportant whether we reached Ghardaia or not, but the men wished to reach Ghardaia. Finally I went on strike.

"I will stop, Cessi!"

"Just a little further," urged Cessi, "this is no place to camp. There is a sheltered place about half an hour away."

Lured by the idea of shelter I consented. Two hours passed. I was numbed with cold.

"There!" Cessi pointed triumphantly.

I looked where he pointed and saw nothing but a

ARAB INTERLUDE

tamarisk bush. It was a pathetically small piece of vegetation, alone in the great space. Dick began to giggle. It was contagious. I saw the humour of it and laughed too.

The next day we trekked across land that had lost all character of desert. In single file we wound our way among volcanic hills and mounds of unearthly shape. The flint cut one's feet. There were great black liquid stains like congealed lava upon the rocks. No sign of vegetation, not a bird, nor even a lizard. We had been suddenly transported millions of years ahead to the period when life shall be extinct upon the earth. Dick said: "It's like pictures of the moon!" It led us, however, to the green and fertile land of promise, to Ghardaia, the great city of the M'zab.

Here we parted with our companions and our beasts. Dick kissed his camel and wept, he had grown to love it! We were sorry to leave our friends, but we promised each and all that we would meet again (Inshallah).

(In the years to come, I was to see them frequently. Whenever Cessi came into Biskra from the desert he invariably brought me a freshly killed gazelle. He had a beautiful manner, and with his hand on his heart would invoke Allah's blessing on me and mine. Ahmed and Daragi were the most ragged and savage-looking Nomads who ever came to town. Tourists would be astonished to see these two rush up to me and shake me warmly by the hand, their faces glowing with pleasure. To me they were not ragged Nomads, but honest and devoted friends.)

BY CAMEL

From Ghardaia to Laghouat we did the few hours' journey in the Arab omnibus! That too was an experience. At sunset we halted to enable the passengers to say their prayers.

Naoui looked on cynically. He thought himself infinitely superior in his European trousers. Europe had imported Western civilisation and he had lost his faith. I was glad when we parted company at Laghouat.

CHAPTER V

Consequences

ON my way through Laghouat I got engaged to an Englishman. It was one of those foolish irresistible things one does in a moment of weakness. It is such fun to dream of happiness and believe it is coming true. In my saner moments I said to myself that I was merely courting trouble, and hadn't there always been trouble enough? But he was good-looking, he wore a burnous and an Old Etonian tie. He was in sheep-breeding partnership with a local Caïd. He loved the Arabs and Arab life and we deluded ourselves that we were well assorted.

We planned to spend the summer together. My brother Peter joined us, with his motor bicycle and side-car. Between the two of us (his machine and my Renault), children, fiancé and luggage were transported. Fiancé could do most things except drive a car. He did the piloting—that is to say, he took the whole bunch of us all round his part of the world where the Arab chiefs were his friends and received us hospitably. We stayed with Caïds, Marabouts¹ and the Bash Agha of Laghouat.

It was our first experience of Africa in August. The sun beat upon us mercilessly through the thin canvas hood. The distances in Africa necessitate ten

¹ Holy men descended from the Prophet.



The Sheikh-el-Arab



The Agha with his falcon

CONSEQUENCES

and twelve hours at the driving-wheel. There was no one to take a turn, so it all fell on me. How a man experienced in African life could have allowed us to travel during the heat of the day I have never understood. We even made a dash to Biskra to show it to Peter. We travelled west to east and back again, hundreds of miles in the Sahara. Subsequent experience has taught me the madness of that summer. I dare to boast great powers of resistance, but once when I arrived at our appointed destination in a state of collapse, the big blond Englishman remarked deprecatingly that I had "no reserve strength."

Before the summer was over I had dysentery, but I still kept going. There was no one else to drive the car. Then one evening just outside the Caravanserai of Ain-el-Ibel I bungled my gears and remember no more. Dick got the car into the Caravanserai and there we remained until I was in a fit state to go on. Apparently I had fever and in my delirium declared I could hear the bells of the Kremlin!

In my lucid moments the Englishman tried to convince me that Dick's future depended on his going to school. Any other Englishman would probably have said as much. His father doubtless would have insisted. When Sir Roger Keyes brought the Fleet to Algiers he tried to persuade me to put him into the Navy! The things my brother Peter had said and written on the subject of the bringing up of my son would have given any other mother sleepless nights. According to my ideas the children had a pretty good education. Margaret at fourteen had read every one of Anatole France's works in French, Vasari

ARAB INTERLUDE

and Tolstoi. Dick was not studious, but he was observant and assimilative. He took nothing for granted. He argued, criticised and judged. Travel and types of tutor had developed his mind in a way which was not at all ordinary. I had no desire to see him cast in a mould. I regard as negligible what most people regard as essential. Some of my family's opinions were actuated by class solidarity, by snobbism, and others by what they called "common sense." I may say that not one of them shared the viewpoint of an artist. *Artists* belong nowhere and everywhere. There is not a state of society, the very highest or the very lowest, into which we artists do not fit. We have a sense of superiority that makes us, in our hearts, patronising to kings. Our sense of craftsmanship puts us on an equality with the workers of the world. We are humble as only those can be who are eternally struggling to attain. We are proud because we see the light on the mountain-top that is not visible to the average individual. We are a fraternity that belongs to every country and that remains unaffected by any political upheaval. We can express ourselves equally under the Communist, Fascist, Democratic, or Autocratic systems.

I wanted my children to belong to all the world and all the world to them, and it seemed to me we were getting on awfully well in that direction. It was a kind of an experiment, but it did not frighten me. Why shouldn't one experiment with lives? I am sure that most parents choose only the well-trodden paths so that in case of failure they can have nothing to reproach themselves. Eton and Harrow and the

CONSEQUENCES

rest are very expensive acquitters of responsibility. They are a form of moral cowardice.

When certain members of my family warned me that my children would some day turn and curse me I just laughed. . . .¹

However, as all experiences are worth while, and school is an experience worth adding to the rest, I allowed myself to be persuaded. But I stipulated that the school should not be in England, although I did not mind its being English. Two seas between us was more than I could envisage.

My mother was living in Switzerland and recommended an English school that was close to her. The author of this evil plan, seeing that I was suffering from a general breakdown, offered to take Dick to Switzerland and deposit him at the school. Dick's face of blank reproach when we parted haunted me for days. It implied that I had gone back on all my convictions, that I had allowed a third person to come between us. I realised it was a dreadful betrayal. Before the English sheep-breeder had returned from the Swiss mission I had changed my mind about marriage, but I had promised my mother that I would "give the school a chance," *i.e.* send Dick back a second term, so after Christmas I braced myself for another parting. This time Dick was to do the journey alone. I put him on the boat, and for some reason which I cannot now remember, the only person who stood by me at that moment was old

¹ The experiment is perhaps not yet complete. However, at the time of writing, Margaret is married to a man with a fine career, and Dick, on the eve of his nineteenth birthday, published a book that has been well reviewed.

ARAB INTERLUDE

Monsieur Miené. Such little incidents sometimes lead to important results. Monsieur Miené seemed to be woven into our destinies at that moment for a purpose.

He came on board and installed Dick's things in his cabin while I wistfully recommended the child to a sympathetic steward. Upon the sunny deck I tried to appear cheerful until a bell sounded, signal for those to leave the ship who did not mean to travel by it. Anguishing moment: I knelt down to kiss Dick and he clasped his arms tightly round my neck. Whatever it was that happened to me at that moment happened also to him. We clung to one another, and could not be separated. Tears streamed down our faces. I felt I could not, would not let him go. It was a kind of blind insanity. I saw neither passengers nor ship's officers. I was not conscious of being on shipboard. A ghastly bell was clanging, and it was like death that separates you from one you love. Then something violent happened, we were forced apart—Monsieur Miené, his arm linked through mine, led me to the gangway. A few more agonising minutes on the quay before the big ship flung off her cables, then the water widened between me and the little figure on deck. I had completely lost my self-control and sobbed as though my heart would break. Monsieur Miené finally took me to a café up in the town that overlooked the bay, and from there we watched the ship grow smaller towards the horizon. Try as I would to pull myself together, I felt literally sick with misery. Monsieur Miené then asked me why I sent my son to school? He said: "It is a barbarous custom. We

CONSEQUENCES

French do not separate children from their mothers at the age when they most need them. What advantage is it to Dick to be educated far away from you? Why cannot you educate him here? Lots of French boys, sons of cultured parents, are educated at the Lycée. You are an independent woman, you have no husband to force you against your will. Why do it? It is bad for you and it is not good for the boy."

He had always longed for a child of his own. He could not imagine, he said, enduring such partings.

After I got home I was in bed for two weeks with jaundice, but my mind was made up. It had all been a vain sacrifice and it never should happen again.

CHAPTER VI

The Parsonage

WHENEVER I am in a dilemma and make a subconscious demand for help, something turns up.

This time divine intervention came in the guise of Lucius Fry, the English chaplain. Beth, his wife, adored her son as I adored mine. We put our mother heads together, and after much discussion Lucius agreed to tutor his boy and mine together. It was a curious sequence to tutors, Russian, German and Macedonian ; royalist, communist and anarchist. The chaplain was a wireless expert, carpenter and tailor. He was generally wrapt in thought, but formidable whenever he roused himself to assert his authority.

Beth, his wife, was a painter in her spare time. There were two daughters : Joan, dashing and sporting; Boodie, who danced in the ballet at the Opera.

At the parsonage one met models on the stairs; paint brushes were mixed with the cooking utensils, wireless spare parts covered every table, home-made loud speakers blared forth from under the tables. While Joan in one room practised the piano, Boodie in another invented new dances to a gramophone. John the son collected stray dogs which added to the confusion. For some years Dick's education progressed in this colourful atmosphere.

THE PARSONAGE

He was evolving rapidly and kaleidoscopically. It was in Germany that he originally acquired the violin idea. A Russian playing in a restaurant had inspired in Dick the idea of playing the violin to assist the family finances. He learned to fiddle with a variety of masters in different countries, but as they never would teach him anything but exercises and as any idea of a tune was reserved for an ultimate future, a future that kept receding even as he advanced, he finally got discouraged. The violin cost a good deal of money, time and effort before it was finally abandoned. Margaret had a good deal to do with its abandonment. She called it "scraping catgut," and Dick arrived at a realisation that scraping catgut, however soulfully, might not be so very remunerative after all!

I had always cherished a hope that my son might ultimately prove to be an artist, and so at the age of thirteen he joined an art class to put his talent to the test. The "Academy" was under the supervision of a Spanish painter. Dick attended the studio two or three times a week, and the allotted time was two hours. It was impossible, however, to get him away. He only left when the doors closed. In fact the whole course of his life might have been determined had not the Academy closed down because the Spaniard left Algiers. There was no other art school, and so art went the way of the violin!

During the Biskra holidays it looked at one moment as though he might take after his fox-hunting grandfather. The Bash Agha, who treated him as a son, offered him any horse in his stable to ride. Dick

ARAB INTERLUDE

chose the huge bay stallion kept for ceremonial occasions. It was seldom exercised and was fed on oats. When it came out of the stable it would only walk on its hind-legs except when it took the bit between its teeth. Happily an Arab bit is a severe thing. Riding this quivering animal with snorting nostrils and bulging eyes, Dick scattered people in the narrow main street as he was destined to scatter them later and for many years to come, in many towns in several lands, when he learned to drive a car.

Horses remained his passion until the Missions to Seamen in Algiers lent him a sailing-boat. Then the seed that was sea-sown on the Bosphorus broke through and asserted itself mightily. The sea is his love, his inspiration ; it combines for him art, music, poetry, song . . . the sea has prevailed.

CHAPTER VII

Return Journey

WE had decided to give up the Miené villa and transfer ourselves to Biskra where Aïssa Ben Gana reported several date gardens for sale. Although Dick had to pursue his studies at Algiers I promised him a desert home for the holidays. When Margaret and I started in a car loaded with luggage Dick was full of advice ; he had already a superiority complex about motors.

Monsieur Miené repeated warnings about Arabs:

“Time yourself to reach some place by nightfall. Don’t be on the road after dark. Remember—the *bicots* (Algerian slang for ‘natives’) are all thieves and cut-throats——”

He stuck Dick’s small-bore gun in a conspicuous place. We had no cartridges, but “the mere sight of it,” he said, “would lend us protection.”

Looking back I can hardly remember a motor trip across the desert that was not an adventure. If we did not stick in a sand-drift, bump the bottom on a boulder, flood the carburettor crossing a river, or fall foul of some other natural phenomenon, then it was engine trouble. On this occasion the trouble, with which I was absolutely incapable of coping, began quite early on, when I took a wrong turn off the main road that led straight into the mountains. I quickly

ARAB INTERLUDE

discovered my mistake and backed on to the main Sétif road. The gears then jammed, the French call it *coincer*, and quinned they had to such an extent that nothing would move her out of reverse.

The human freight of the omnibus "Messagerie de la Grande Kabylie" which we had overtaken so grandly (she was overflowing with burnoused Arabs who are unaccustomed to see women doing anything independently) jeered at us as they passed, and Margaret and I felt fools. We put on a brave air, however, pulled up the floor-boards, extracted a hammer from the toolbox and started hammering. Naturally, the road was too frequented for us to remain long unassisted.

A car stopped, containing a very large Algerian Jew; he knew what it was to *coincer*; he disengaged the jammed shaft at once, but left us to replace the floor-boards. The Messagerie de la Grande Kabylieites, who had jeered at us, now cheered as we repassed them. *How* everyone did stare at us on the road! Few women drive cars in Algeria, and women unescorted are not seen any distance outside the towns. There must have been something in the Renault's appearance that suggested business. We were obviously trekking. A man on a lorry blew me a kiss! Arabs on carts nearly fell off straining to look back.

It is a lonely road inland to Palestro through the Kabyle country. The Kabyles are supposed to be the indigenous race. They do not veil their women. They look with scorn upon the Arabs as alien intruders, and upon the Europeans with fierce disdain. The country, however, is very beautiful, the hill-tops crowned by cubistic villages.

RETURN JOURNEY

True to our schedule, we arrived at Palestro in time for lunch. Hearing that we were on our way to Biskra, the proprietors of the restaurant exclaimed: "Alone! What courage!" "Monsieur le patron" espied our 16-bore gun, asked if it were loaded, and begged to be allowed to give me two *cartouches*. His wife expostulated: "Don't load it! Let Madame load it when it becomes necessary." But he knew that if it were needed at all it would be needed in a hurry. He therefore proceeded to load it. I can hardly say that the incident was reassuring.

Just as we were taking in some petrol a tiny girl came and begged. She was so amusingly decked out and impudent, I gave her some sous. Her mother, a stalwart gipsy Nomad woman, laid a hand on the steering-wheel and bade me wait.

"Give me your hand," she said (I am incorrigibly superstitious); then, with what seemed to me a clairvoyant verbosity, she began to tell me things that were true, even as to my recent correspondence. I asked her, hoping to catch her out, where my husband was. She gestured by laying her head on her folded hands that he was sleeping, a "long, long sleep," she said with fearful accuracy.

Then, "Take some money in your hand," she ordered. I opened my bag, but seeing its contents she would not be satisfied with five francs. I must hold a "big piece," she said, so I took a 100-franc note. She bade us each spit upon it, as she did also, and then, producing a bit of old ribbon, she tied it in five knots and touched each of us with it. "I am taking away," she crooned, "all your sorrows to my-

ARAB INTERLUDE

self, all your anxieties to myself, all your cares, all your fears. When these knots unravel themselves then your happiness will begin."

"When will they unravel?" I asked eagerly. She spat again upon the paper money and, opening her dress, bared a breast and enriched the handful with her infant's milk. Then closing my fingers on this strange concoction, she held them so for some seconds whilst she pronounced an Arab incantation. When I opened my hand the ribbon she had knotted was unravelled and the money had magically disappeared. She smiled at my surprise, explained that happiness was ours and the money hers. We must not "grudge it" nor be angry. I tried to say that 100 francs was too much, but Margaret urged me not to claim it for fear she should turn and curse us.

Whatever happened we must get to Bordj-bou-Areridge, as there was no sleeping accommodation at any place before it. For four hours we ran marvellously, but as the shadows lengthened we watched the milestones anxiously. We were in a land where from twilight one slips almost directly into night. It happened of course, just as the sky was overspread with glowing pink and we were in the loneliest country, that a tyre burst. The milestone indicated four kilometres to the next village. I ascertained that although every other tool was in its place the large instrument for unscrewing the wheel was not there.

I confess that never in my life had I changed a wheel and, although I was sure I knew how, I welcomed any excuse not to do so. We moved on slowly at 15 kilometres an hour, and arrived in the

RETURN JOURNEY

dark at a tiny place where there was no garage. The pub-keeper fortunately took pity on us. He and a small Arab removed a completely shattered tyre and an air tube that looked as if it had been chewed by a monster. Happily I had a spare.

Thirty kilometres now lay between us and Bordj-bou-Areridge, of which the first twelve were through the mountains. In the glare of our headlights jackals, hares and jerboas fled ahead of us. When we reached the top of the long, winding hill the Renault refused to change into third. Once again we had *coincé*. As we had no interior light and therefore could not see to pull up the floor-boards and hammer, there was nothing to be done but to push on slowly in second. It was hard to tell in the dark how slowly one was going: it seemed to us very slowly indeed, but presently the engine heated and emitted a strange smell of burning. We went slower still. Finally, in a dead dark Arab village I stopped in front of the only lighted window; it was uncurtained. I looked in and saw that it was European.

In answer to repeated knocks a woman came to the door, opened it ajar and addressed me nervously in Arabic. When she heard herself answered in French she opened wide, and with her hand on her heart exclaimed, "Oh, Madame, you did frighten me!" In what way I had frightened her I did not ask, but this was the post office, and the postman (who should have opened the door instead of the poor nervous lady) came forth with a lamp.

Immediately a crowd gathered. There was no garage, they said, but there was a rich native who

ARAB INTERLUDE

owned a car; they would wake him up to come and help us. The Arab, elegantly attired in a gold-embroidered burnous (a Caïd, doubtless), understood nothing about the machine and took it for granted that I knew less. His only interest was in the gun and whether it was loaded.

By the postman's lamp I was able to pull up the floor and hammer the right piece of machinery. To the surprise of everyone I got her going without their help. The postman, however, said it was desirable to have a reliable engine when one is doing such a journey, which gave us quite an heroic sensation as we pushed into the night towards Bordj-bou-Areridge. It was with sincere relief that we eventually sighted its very welcome lights.

Without further mishap we arrived at the hotel. The proprietor gave us an effusive welcome.

"To-morrow," he said, bursting with pride, "Mr. Ramsay MacDonald will sleep here." He said it as if Mr. MacDonald were still the Prime Minister of England. "To-morrow," I said, "I shall be in Biskra." European though he was, he answered as an Arab: "Inshallah" (if God wills).

We were extremely pleased with ourselves for getting away from Bordj-bou-Areridge at eight o'clock in the morning. It was a cold, dreary drive to Sétif: undulating, colourless, treeless land with not a thing in sight. We sped along, however, with the inner satisfaction that our early start would enable us to reach Biskra before lunch—Inshallah!

On the outskirts of Sétif we met a caravan, with all the local colour afforded by camels, goats, lambs,

RETURN JOURNEY

women in scarlet with small bundles of babies, be-decked in gold and silver ornaments. The camels, as ever, proud, slow, and obstinate, brought us to a standstill. When condescendingly they cleared out of the road, the Renault had *coincided*. We remained in second and betook us in the town to the best garage. They opened the gear-box and showed me what was wrong. Apparently the shaft on which the gear-wheels are threaded danced up and down instead of remaining even, and, so far as I could understand, if it happened to jump just as one was changing gear, the wheel cogs failed to intermix and the result was what the French call *coincer*. They (the Spanish and the French mechanics) said that only a miracle had enabled us to come so far, and that we had risked smashing up the gear-box. It might in fact explode at any moment, and probably would do so in the desert!

I had visions of an explosion like a bomb, and of cogs and shafts and arms and legs flying in the air. I pretended, of course, that I knew what they were talking about, examined the cog-wheels and the shaft knowledgeably. Naturally I took their advice and abandoned the car to them. They promised to work all night if necessary so as to have her ready for the morning. That condemned us to a whole day and night in Sétif, where there was nothing to do and nothing to see, where it was bitterly cold on account of its high altitude, and where small waifs and strays follow one about jeering and insulting in three languages if one accedes not to their begging. It was raining steadily to add to our discomfiture. We settled down to our tedious wait.

ARAB INTERLUDE

Although Margaret had often said that the pleasantest thing she looked back upon in England was "settling down" to things on a rainy day, she was far from pleased when we were marooned at Sétif.

In the afternoon we wandered down to the garage to see how they were getting on, and there found the car propped up on cube-boxes ; a long iron bar with axle attached was lying on the garage floor. I was shown the faulty part. Exactly how it should have looked I did not know. The "spare," I was informed, could not be found in Sétif. The part must be made, and they would make it. They would work all night at it, and we could start—well, not at eight ; perhaps at midday.

We departed crestfallen, the car looked as if it never would move again. How I hated it. I resolved to sell it. I remembered that I had always hated motors.

The next morning the garage sent us word that *perhaps* we could have the car *after* lunch. Then, of course, it would be too late to start, but Margaret was of opinion that we should get away from Sétif at all costs, and because I demurred she elected to be scornful, said I had lost my nerve, that I must be growing old (such things modern children dare to say!). At four o'clock we went for a trial spin. The mechanic swore she would never *coince* again. "I can guarantee," he said, "you will have no more trouble. In every way she is a perfect machine."

The bill was 500 francs; but if really she was never to *coince* again I did not grudge it. The part they had made was like a hand that gripped a wrist. I was offered the defaulting piece as a doctor



Photo Marcus Adams

View from the garden, looking north



Haafa and Zora

RETURN JOURNEY

might offer his patient the diseased tonsil he had removed. I half expected to see it in a bottle of spirits, and refused to be hampered with it, but left it at the garage with profuse thanks and extra payments for all their great kindness, trouble and interest. We did not start that day, but at seven o'clock the next morning, on an endless straight road that seemed to go on for ever southwards.

Just when we thought we were getting on rather well, the inevitable camels on the road slowed us down into second and—we *coincided*! So much for our two days' delay and the 500 francs bill. Luckily the car responded to the hammer-blows, and we succeeded in *un-coincing* her: moreover, we made up our delay by taking a new short-cut which is forbidden to heavy traffic, thus saving about sixteen kilometres.

The country was almost dead flat and nothing intervened, so that there was no need to change gears. We felt that at last we were approaching our own land, for the milestones said fifteen kilometres to MacMahon, and MacMahon is on the direct Constantine-Biskra road. Also it is quite near El-Kantara, "The Gate of the Desert." One is hardly justified, however, in regarding El-Kantara as the gate of the desert. We seemed to have been in the desert ever since we left Sétif. Desert it certainly was, although a mountain range still separated us from the actual Sahara.

Fifteen kilometres from MacMahon we encountered a longish hill with a twist in it, which obliged us to get into second. At the top of the hill the Renault would not return into third. We had *coincided* yet

ARAB INTERLUDE

again, this time hopelessly. We hammered, but to no avail; the gears had stuck as if for ever. We were on one of those hill-tops from which one sees the surrounding country for miles and miles, and we espied below and beyond a steam-roller puffing white smoke, and a collection of blotches that meant a camp. We gave the car a push with the intention of volplaning down to the steam-roller, but she stuck on a rise round the bend that hid the steam-roller from view.

Seeing the hopelessness of the thing, we tried once again to hammer. I hit till the hammer was dented and my arm ached. Then Margaret took a turn at it. She hit at random any part of the machinery that came in range of her strongest blow, and equally with no result. Two Arabs then appeared out of the void. One with a laden donkey passed on, but his companion stopped. He jibbered Arabic at us with gesticulations. Arabic is a very harsh tongue to the unfamiliar, and the more so when, because you do not understand, the Arab shouts. Failing to understand, I replied fluently and suitably in English.

He was hard-faced, lean and hungry-looking, the sort of Arab one does not want to meet when one has broken down. I understood he wanted money; he managed to force this upon my understanding long before I admitted having understood. For money he would be willing to go and fetch the mechanic of the "machine pouf-pouf"! I opened my bag to give him five francs, and his eyes gleamed like his teeth. He asked for more. I refused. He insisted. I was adamant. There really was no reason why he

RETURN JOURNEY

shouldn't have taken my bag as the elephant at the Zoo once took a basket that was under my arm; but he didn't. I mutely agreed (I believe) to add to his pay in the event of his return with the mechanic. At last he hurried off and was lost to sight.

I then looked at Margaret and Margaret looked at me, and we both had the self-same idea; he would return with more Arabs and they would loot everything in the car. I began to remember all the stories that the French had ever told me; the Arabs were a race of cut-throats, thieves who would kill anyone for five francs. I had seen in a Kabyle forest a commemoration stone to a man who had on that exact spot died by having his throat cut.

Dick's gun was still loaded, but how could one shoot on sight or on fright? In any case, of what use a gun with only two cartridges? Margaret and I in desperation set ourselves to hammer again. If will-power and belief could have succeeded then we would have *un-coined* those gears. If strength could have availed we would have pushed her up that slope to the next descent. If luck had been with us she would have started in second and enabled us to reach the steam-roller.

Margaret was very pink (and says I was); she thought that people like Gordon of Khartoum were very brave. I said acidly it was a pity we hadn't started "last night just before dark"; I also said it was a pity I had lost my nerve, and so lucky Margaret had preserved hers! When each of us had finished saying things, we decided to abandon the car and walk to the steam-roller. "There won't be a thing

ARAB INTERLUDE

left when we get back," I said, and scanned the countryside. Not a soul was in sight, but Arabs, we know, appear from nowhere.

We walked. And then we realised that in the clear atmosphere it was difficult to judge distances accurately. We walked in fact five kilometres, and then met our Arab returning. He was again vociferous, he *would* run towards the car, and would *not* accompany us to the steam-roller. "He's running," I said, "to loot our luggage," and we nearly wept; but we thought it the lesser of the two evils to lose the contents of the car than to be hit on the head. I wondered what an Arab highwayman would do with my precious leather satchel containing letters from Henry James, George Moore and Robert Hichens.

When we reached the steam-roller it was not working, but there was a gipsy van alongside. My heart leapt for joy (no Arab has a gipsy van), and I shouted in French: "Are there French people in there?" There were, God bless them! Two men, a woman, and some children lunching.

The Arab had honestly been to them and asked them to help, but "I have only one hour for my *déjeuner*," said the mechanic; "I have not time." Not even to save our lives! Seeing my distress they sent me back accompanied by the trusted Moustapha, a smiling, well-tamed Arab. "And," added the Frenchman, "when the horses arrive that are bringing tar, I will send them on to you to drag your car here."

Leaving Margaret in the steam-roller hut, I retraced those five kilometres uphill in the company of Moustapha, and just as we reached the car the horses

RETURN JOURNEY

arrived also. Our first Arab was there sitting by the roadside as though on guard, and nothing had been looted. He came forward at once to claim more money. I had left my bag with Margaret and so had none to give. He protested loudly. I gathered that he was telling the other two that I would not pay him for his long walk. I intervened angrily, and told them he had received five francs (which, after all, is the standard wage of an Arab labourer per day).

The angry Arab got angrier; he shook his fist in my face and then made the familiar gesture of finger on throat, which those who have lived in the Orient understand so well. Perhaps he was sorry he hadn't done it when he could. The horseman's attitude was sublime indifference, and he got on with the job of harnessing the horses to the car. Moustapha gestured to me, with his finger to his lips, not to argue; it savoured of warning. What happened then is what happens in a story-book. A motor car was heard coming up the hill. I stood in the middle of the road as it came round the bend; it had to jam on its brakes for I stood with extended arms as though I meant to hug it. The chauffeur got down and opened the door. I rushed forward and addressed a strange man in French, "*Monsieur, est-ce que votre chauffeur*——?" but he cut me short and answered in American: "I guess you want help." The chauffeur most obligingly lay on his back under the stomach of my machine and tightened a screw. He said I must watch that screw; it might shake loose. He showed me exactly what to do if she ever *coined* again, and I felt at last that there were no more

ARAB INTERLUDE

secrets hidden from me, that I knew all there was to know about gears, gear-shafts and gear-boxes.

The American said, "You sure have some nerve to be touring this country all alone." I was thankful that he did not know just how little nerve I had before he came round the corner. Then as I had no money to recompense his chauffeur, the American (how American!) said that he would do it for me. The angry Arab came forward and made a last attempt to renew his claim. The chauffeur, to whom I explained the situation, rounded on him fiercely, whilst I started up my engine and carried Moustapha quickly back to the steam-roller, where I exchanged him for Margaret.

At MacMahon, where we had to stop and buy some petrol, I took a wrong turn and had to reverse. In reverse we *coincided*. Three times she repeated the performance. Each time Margaret and I had to take up the floor-boards. The beautiful run from El-Kantara across the real desert with its oases full of tall green palm trees was utterly ruined for us. The Nomad women on the road, dressed in their brilliant colours, with their bundle-loads of children, the goats and the piping shepherds—all the scenes I loved—were lost on me that day.

When we reached Biskra I announced to the garage that I would give a hundred francs to whoever could discover the cause of my trouble. The next day it was magically put right. Much explanation was vouchsafed, to which I returned as usual a wise and understanding look.

CHAPTER VIII

Buying Land

WE rented a small house in a quiet part of Biskra town, and every day Aïssa Ben Gana fetched us in his car to show us the gardens he had ascertained were for sale. They all seemed rather dull. Those in the heart of the oasis had no view; in summer there would be no air. Even in this month of November I felt stifled by the palm trees. Aïssa said they were young strong trees with a harvest value; he seemed only to see land from that point of view. Eventually I found what I wanted without anybody's help. It happened, like all good things, by chance.

We used to frequent a little Arab café situated on the road leading to the village of M'cid. The café was a famous place to which tourists were always brought by the local guides, who had learnt the value of sunsets. The little sandy terrace commanded a superb view of the desert to the south and east, and of the Aurès range on the north. As the sun sank in the west, the desert and mountains were suffused with opalescent light. No painter was ever able to reproduce the colours of those sunsets. The world became fiery translucent orange and violet, followed by pale mauve and pink hydrangea colours.

The Arabs squatting on their rush mats, smoking and drinking coffee, talked in low voices or were

ARAB INTERLUDE

silent. They scarcely ever glanced at the glory of the sky. This was left to Europeans perched on hard iron chairs produced for their benefit.

One evening Margaret and I, who preferred a rush mat, were sipping our coffee when a well-dressed Arab introduced himself. He had heard I was looking for land to buy; did I know there were three gardens each alongside the other adjoining the café? He pointed to the high wall that separated us from the palm trees beyond. I was not too interested for fear the price should be adapted to my interest, but I inspected the gardens. They were full of quince, fig, pomegranate and wild orange trees. Through the palm stems that rose like slender columns one viewed the desert and the mountains: a wide *oued* (river-bed) formed a frontier between oasis and desert. Autumn rains and melting snows in the mountains produced a flood twice a year, and this flood had eaten away the banks of the *oued* so that the edge of the palm gardens was perched, so to speak, on a cliff. If the floods were a menace, the advantages were obvious. On the east side no wall was necessary, the height of the cliff was protection enough. Also the *oued* supplied certain building material gratis, stones and sand were to be had for the taking.

My mind was made up at once. I invited Agha Aïssa to come and see this new-found Paradise.

Aïssa brought his steward, whose professional eye was valuable for appraisal. They surveyed the palm trees with calm disdain. Having toured the three gardens he expressed himself:

"The trees are old. They have been neglected.

BUYING LAND

You have only to look at them to see that for years they were not watered——”

The lower stems were thick and full sized, then the stem shrunk as if an iron collar had strangled it; this represented the waterless years. Then when suddenly they were cared for the crests had filled out alarmingly; it seemed as if in a wind they must snap. But I liked the way they grew in clumps, three or four great stems from one root. Aïssa pointed out they should be planted in a straight row. I argued they were more picturesque in groups. Aïssa did not know the word picturesque; he said the gardens were worthless and that he could not advise me to buy them.

I said I was buying not so much the gardens as the sunset. He gave up the argument. His steward's opinion of me was obviously the average Arab's opinion of woman, especially where business is concerned.

In one of the gardens there were three very old olive trees. One indeed was monumental. The Arabs believe that olives date back to the Roman occupation, for the Romans planted olive trees, which the Arabs seldom do. The veteran tree was magnificent; I stroked its gnarled and twisted trunk with reverence.

The gardens were not easily acquired, which helped perhaps to make them more precious. Aïssa Ben Gana and the Bash Agha did their best to help and placed me in good legal hands. But they could not prevail on poor Arabs not to extort three times the value of their respective properties. It was too good a chance

ARAB INTERLUDE

to be missed. Aïssa was sure I would give up the effort as soon as I realised the difficulties. The difficulties came one by one. I soon learned that even the smallest piece of ground belonged to a family collectively. The problem presented itself in an aggravated form when it became necessary to assemble every member of a family before the French notary. The women were veiled and must not show their faces; some of the younger ones had never been outside their houses. They could not sign their names, they would have to make a mark, but the mark of a girl who was under age was not valid, and no one had a birth certificate.

The French *notaire* of course was accustomed to these family parties. The women sat in a corner of the room on the floor, their backs turned on the proceedings. The eldest male member acted as spokesman. He jealously watched the huddled figures, and if one of them had dared to peep through a crack in her *haaf*¹ that covered her from head to foot, or manifested the faintest curiosity or interest, she would have been beaten when she got home. I was there with thousands of francs in notes, ready to hand them over on completion of the signatures.

The *notaire* had to be satisfied as to the identity and ages of each. A girl, questioned by him in Arabic, answered timidly that her age was fourteen. Her brother sharply retorted that she was a liar; her age, he said, was nineteen! An acrid discussion ensued, every member of the family shouting at the same

¹ *Haaf* (Arab woman's garment), a wide length of material draped and pinned according to the fashion of the Ancient Romans

BUYING LAND

time. Although the notary was not allowed to see the girl's face he was now convinced that she was under age. The head of the family was furious because a fortune was being held up by one small fool girl who had blurted out the truth. He promised she would be brought back in two days' time "of age"; this meant he would marry her to someone the following night! An obliging cousin could probably be found who would be willing for the sake of a share in the impending fortune.

The second garden was owned by a widow who had one daughter. She held the land from her husband. He had been dead five years, and during those years the garden had been watered only when some kind friend of her husband's, or a distant cousin, condescended to do so. It was a very distant cousin who acted for her on this occasion, and as I suspected at the time, three-quarters of the purchase money got no further than his own pocket. The widow had to be satisfied with what he gave her, and she was lucky to get anything. In the years to come I often met her on the road, for she was old and could go out—veiled of course. Whenever she espied me, she would let her veil fall aside—if no man was in sight—and tell me her troubles. She was desperately poor, and I always tried to help her, but every time I gave her anything she brought me eggs, or a pair of pigeons, or a hen. I never could outdo her in gifts! Arabs are a paradoxical people, grasping and yet generous.

The third garden belonged to three brothers and a

ARAB INTERLUDE

sister. They were members of the family of Slimane. The Slimanes were all-important in the village of M'cid, but at the time of purchase the name was no more to me than any other. Slimanes were just Arabs, undistinguishable from any other.

Kuder, the eldest of the three brothers, acted as spokesman. He seemed to be feared by his family. He had a red beard turning grey, a suave voice, an oily manner, and was distinguishable by his yellow embroidered turban. When asked his age, he replied that he was forty-five. The *notaire* and I exclaimed incredulously. Kuder smiled: "It doesn't matter," he said. "You can give me any age you like, nothing will bring back my youth." Finally he admitted he was "five years old when the railway came to Biskra."

"Umph!" said the *notaire*, "that makes you fifty-five."

At last I owned the three gardens. Aïssa said the prices I had paid were scandalous. The Bash Agha said that nothing is expensive if you've got what you want.

To inherit land is one sensation. But to buy out of the whole big wide world a plot of your own choosing with money you've *earned*—well! Let the Communists despair when I've told them. . . .

I find it difficult to frame into words my absurd feelings about that plot of land. I sat down on the sandy soil and patted it. I said, "It is *mine*, my very own for all time! It is my children's after me."

CHAPTER IX

Zora

ALTHOUGH we had our lodging in the town, the town saw little of us. We motored to the garden and spent the day there, taking our lunch. Life seemed a grand picnic.

Our great excitement was throwing down the walls that divided the three properties. Dick, on holiday, worked energetically. The walls, like the houses in the oasis, were built of mud baked in the sun. If houses were sufficiently protected by plaster and gutters they could last as long as a hundred years, but garden walls were constantly having to be renewed, for rain and sun crumbled their surfaces, and irrigation reduced their foundations.

The walls of my gardens were old and easily thrown down. When the first breach was made, we faced a little, bright-coloured group of children on the other side, who stared in extreme curiosity. A big boy who said his name was Haafa wore a petunia-coloured *gondourah*, and held his little cousin Zora by the hand. She was about six years old and dressed in a long full powder-blue silk dress, woven with silver swallows on the wing. Her wide sleeves were of primrose lace, her hair was hidden by a magenta turban with gold stripes, into which was tucked rakishly a scarlet pomegranate blossom. She had

ARAB INTERLUDE

bare feet and silver anklets that jingled. Her very shy brother, in canary yellow, was half-hidden behind the elder one. For a moment we stood speechless and staring. Haafa explained that his cousins were the children of Lakdar the one-time owner.

They offered to lend a hand in the work of destruction, and we all became great friends. After that Haafa was in the garden whenever we arrived. His presence seemed so appropriate that we never questioned his right. He took charge of the luncheon basket, spread the cloth, brought us coffee from next door, and washed up the things without being asked. He proudly refused to be tipped, declaring he belonged to the family of Slimane, and that he was our friend. (I must add that the friend evolved into a trusted and devoted servant who is with us to this day. If anything in this world is certain, it is that Haafa will be with us to the end, whatever that end may be!)

It was Zora who was the first to initiate me into the mystery contained within high blank walls. She quite firmly took me by the hand one day and led me up the street to her home. Her brother Hamid carried the gramophone, for Zora had promised her family we would bring music with us.

All the children we passed stopped in their games to stare. The men who always lounged about at the cross-roads looked up and smiled. The village idiot emitted a shrill imitation of a Ford klaxon. This was his great accomplishment, and he did it so successfully that tourists would jump aside to let an imaginary car pass by!

The village began where our garden ended. The

ZORA

houses created an almost offensive and defensive atmosphere. Each door seemed to proclaim: "Thou shalt not know." That is to say, those without shall not know what is within, and those within shall not know what is without. Each door sealed a self-contained little world vibrant with human drama. It seemed as if man, appalled by the Sahara, terrified by the vastness of the world around him, had sought refuge in a series of small self-made worlds.

Among this world of houses, one stood out slightly different in outward appearance to the rest. It bridged a road and was supported in the middle upon pillars of palm stems.

Hamid beat a tattoo upon the door and Zora shouted. It was opened by a child, one of the many belonging to the house. We had to stoop as the entrance was very low, and pick our way down a dark passage among goats, and so into a big, almost empty room, lit only by a hole in the ceiling. Nejma, the children's mother, left her terra-cotta cooking-pot that she was fanning with a dried palm branch and shook hands with us. She then took us up a narrow steep stairway to a terrace half-roofed over, where Fatima the wife of Kuder awaited us. We were joined immediately by all the rest of the household. It took me many visits to unravel the relationships of all those women. There was Ayesha, known as grandmother, but not much older than her grand-daughters-in-law; she had been married very young to the father of grown-up sons. She had a superb profile and tragic eyes. Being both childless and a widow she was of little account, but the small children were

ARAB INTERLUDE

devoted to her. Sfaya was a big, strong peasant girl, the unmarried sister of Kuder and Lakdar; upon her devolved all the material jobs, and the care of everybody's babies. A rather good-looking Nomad wife of another brother was relegated to the background. To a family like the Slimanes, distinguished descendants of the Turkish colonists, a Nomad relation was almost a scandal.

Our visit seemed to cause a flutter of excitement, everyone had dressed up for the occasion. While Nejma set the coffee boiling over a charcoal fire, grandmother arranged honey-cakes and date-jam on a brass tray. The wives of Lakdar's three brothers squatted before a bowl of walnuts, cracking them between stones until they had piled up more than I could ever hope to eat in a month. Meanwhile Lakdar's sister Sfaya extracted translucent seeds from pomegranate pods. When Saïd, the wall-eyed younger brother of Kuder, squatted down among us a kind of general protest went up, and Ayesha indignantly ordered him to get out. The Arab woman has her privileges, and one of them is the right to exclude males of the family from female gatherings. Saïd got up, and without a word slung his burnous over his shoulder and slunk away.

The gramophone was an immense success. The little girls tried to adapt the traditional "belly dance" to jazz rhythm. At the sound of a male voice all laughter stopped. The first instinct was to make sure that no man of the family was within hearing!

There was but one person whose presence, whose very name in fact, acted as a cloud. Every woman

ZORA

and every child in the Slimane house was afraid of Kuder. A hush fell over the household whenever Red Beard entered.

After a while I tried to restrict my visits to the Slimane house, not on account of Red Beard, whom I disliked, but because of the fleas. I could not explain this to Zora even had I known the Arab word for a flea. She certainly would not have understood why anyone should mind such little things. It required all my imagination to invent excuses. I could hear the jingling patter of her bare feet coming across the garden. She always found me no matter where I might be, and would imperatively bid me: "Come to the house, Maama."

"You see I am busy, Zora."

"Mother says come. Aunts say come. Grandmother says come."

"I'll come later."

"The men have all gone to town, come *now*."

"I'll come to-morrow."

Stamping her foot: "They're waiting, they're all waiting."

"They have nothing else to do but wait."

The little arms were thrown around my neck, she squeezed me tight, her cheek pressed against mine: "Grandmother has made honey-cakes."

"They'll keep!"

"I can't go back without you, I dare not—I promised."

To placate the waiting women I ransacked my cupboards.

"There, Zora! A bottle of scent for grandmother,

ARAB INTERLUDE

a bag of sweets for aunt—don't eat them all on the way—a chain of beads for your mother." . . .

But I soon learned there could be no peace for those who would evade their obligations. Before long the jingling anklets came back across the garden. Zora, smiling angelically, was clasping a pair of fluttering pigeons against her breast. In the other hand she carried a handkerchief bulging with eggs.

I would not be outdone in generosity by the poor, and so I must take to that Shmane house gifts to equal if not to outdo theirs. To Zora's delight I drove her to town in the car. There was an Arab shop in the market-place whose merchant had long since given up trying to rob me. Zora chose a length of material for her mother—something violently red, a peacock-blue silk handkerchief striped with gold to make a turban for aunt, a vivid magenta shawl for grandmother. I felt satisfied that the pigeons and the eggs had been amply repaid.

Next morning Zora and Hamid arrived together. Zora carried a hen, Hamid a cock, and each was loaded with oranges and honey-cakes. At sunset, Lakdar, accompanied by the two children, announced they had brought me my evening meal. Nejma had worked all day rolling *cous-cous*. The barley was piled high with meat and every variety of vegetable soaked in a rich flame-coloured oily sauce seasoned with red peppers. There were four other courses, besides dates, oranges, pomegranate seeds and walnuts, more than I could possibly eat (even though I love peppery Arab food). The servants also ate their fill.

Try as I would to get ahead of my Arab friends in

ZORA

the matter of presents, I remained always in their debt.

Zora soon became a personality in the village. She could entertain a whole wedding party half the night, telling them tales of the things she had seen and heard in the *Roumia* house. She knew the difference between wireless and gramophone. She could sit at table, her legs dangling from a chair, and eat with knife and fork. She had looked into books, so many many books with pictures. She had learnt to thread a needle and to sew, she could draw with a pencil on a sheet of paper, but her supreme superiority lay in the fact that she was a motorist! Given her choice between a camel or a motor she chose the motor every time. She evolved a special way of cuddling up to the driver without hampering the gears. She knew how to start up the engine, and was firmly convinced that she could drive if only I would let her.

At the end of a breathless stifling day we would drive far out into the desert until the oasis was but a dark blot of green on the horizon, sit on the hot sand, eat cakes and drink iced orange juice from a thermos. Knowing how all too soon she would be shut up I wanted her to understand the wonderful thing that is *space*. Arab men have that look in their eyes that is peculiar to sailors used to staring into a distant horizon. Arab women, on the contrary, have the limited look of eyes unused to focus on anything but close objects. I wanted Zora to have the far-away look, and to remember. People told me I was cruel to initiate her into a world that she must renounce, but her reaction

ARAB INTERLUDE

to space made it irresistible. Far from sharing my awesome respect of the desert it affected Zora hilariously. Casting aside all her natural decorum, she would roll down the highest sand-dunes, her brocade skirt over her head.

On Fridays when Hamid had no school, the two would tumble and toss in the sand and laugh and sing and shout like shameless Europeans on a Bank Holiday.

CHAPTER X

Building a House

I SPENT days dreaming and planning, drawing lines in the sand where a house might be. Any plan for a house was, however, hampered by the existence of a bit of land that projected like a wedge into my property and that I had been unable to buy. It cut across a corner of the house site. Three scraggy palm trees towered threateningly. They had not been watered for years. The offending land measured only a few yards, but it assumed enormous proportions in my eyes. The owners would not sell. They liked that "garden," they said, it was their whole existence. This of course was a lie, it produced nothing, it owned no water. There was no access to it except through my land unless the owner chose to scale the outer wall against the road, which was very high. The truth was of course that they meant to hold me up to ransom. I determined to ignore the thorn in my side and to proceed with my plans for a house.

I was leaning contemplatively against a palm tree one morning when an Arab broke in on my musing. His French was most imperfect; I understood, however, that he was a mason from the village, and that he was offering to build me a house. He was amiable and persuasive. I consulted Haafa, who phlegmatically

ARAB INTERLUDE

informed me that he was Slimane, and a cousin of his. Ali was his name, and because there are legions of Ali's he was known as Ali the Mason. I was beginning to understand that the name of Slimane meant something in the village and did much towards recommending Ali.

He assured me he had built a lot of houses including his own, which he invited me to go and see. Although I was flush at the moment, my economic future was as vague and insecure as ever. An Arab house, with hard-beaten mud floors and garish Arab carpets on the walls, would fulfil our needs. We would have no furniture other than beds. We would sit on the floor like Arabs, and eat our meals off a little low round table. The simple life. . . . Peace at last, and beauty. . . .

Ali the Mason fitted into this frame of my mind, nevertheless I thought it prudent to try him on something unimportant. I suggested he should build a "Pavilion" in the clearing. He was impressed by my drawing of a dome-roofed colonnade, but he was puzzled by the tree in the picture. He asked if he was expected to produce the tree. I had to explain that the tree was only *pour le joli*—my French, I must add, was suffering horribly, for the Arabs could not understand Parisian, but only pidgin French.

"What will it cost to build?" I asked.

Ali the Mason pushed back his turban (a gesture of profound perplexity that I was to grow accustomed to), he displayed a mop of black curls and scratched his head. Then he set to work with his *règle*, a crazy wooden folding measure that had every number

BUILDING A HOUSE

obliterated, and having been forced open would not fold back. He agreed it was a poor instrument and that when he had made some money out of me he would buy a new one. After some calculations out loud in Arabic and more head scratching, he said: "Ten thousand."

I gasped, for if an open loggia cost ten thousand francs what would a house cost?

"*Toubes*," he corrected—"not francs." *Toubes* are the mud bricks with which Biskra, like Babylon, was built. I then learned that *toubes* cost fifty francs a thousand. Therefore my Pavilion would only cost 500 francs plus the mason's wages, which he claimed were 25 francs a day, and a *manœuvre* to help him at five francs a day.

"Go to it" (*Allez-y*), I said, and so it began. He hired two more *manœuvres* to bring up stones from the *oued*, with which he made foundations that looked as if they were meant to support the Arc de Triomphe! I was required to order sacks of cement from Rodari (Italian of course), the builder in town. Cement I discovered was expensive. Ali emptied the sacks as if they contained sand from the desert, and when the last sack was emptied pushed back his turban, lit a cigarette, and told me that work was suspended because there was no more cement. It was then the middle of the week, the next day being Friday, the Arab Sabbath, no more work would be done till Saturday.

"Ali, why didn't you tell me yesterday that you were running out of cement? I could have had it here this morning."

ARAB INTERLUDE

"I didn't think." (*J'y pas pensé.*)

"You never think."

"*Awa!* It doesn't matter, one day more or less. Now I go to town to buy provisions for the family."

"Not at all, I am going to fetch the cement myself, in my car."

"As you will"—and he sat down philosophically among his stones to wait.

Cement is filthy stuff to put into one's car. It is, if anything, worse than plaster. Rodari's sacks always had a neat hole through which it poured. There came the inevitable day of sack reckoning: Rodari said I owed him one hundred sacks; he priced them at ten francs apiece.

"Ali," I said, "collect the empty sacks."

Ali looked sheepish. He had a certain expression that was more exasperating than any jibbing mule. Ali and his workmen after rummaging about collected ten.

"Where are the rest?"

"*Manarf*" (I don't know).

"But you must know. Ninety sacks can't easily be mislaid."

"Haafa took them to fetch manure for the garden and straw for the donkey."

Haafa admitted he had taken *one*, and brought it back. I now lost my temper. Ali's face put me in a rage. He was so imperturbable. I called him a liar and a thief. I said things about Arabs, all the things that the French had ever said about Arabs.

Ali said: "You must not get cross. Come to the house and dine with the family."



Dick sails a raft on the spring floods



"Peter Pan" in the Sahara !



View from the garden, looking across the *oued* at the oasis of Lalla opposite



BUILDING A HOUSE

"I'll never step foot inside your house! Not until those sacks are found."

They never were found and I did go to his house. The sack problem was to remain acute for many years. Whatever the Arabs did with sacks, with so many sacks, I never discovered. They probably made mattresses for themselves and saddles for their mules. Some they must have sold. An Arab will hit another on the head on a dark night to take his burnous, even though it is an old one. A burnous is always worth a few francs in the market-place, and so is a sack.

It was not so much the expense, for that was relatively little, as the effort, which seemed out of all proportion to the importance of the pavilion. The Bash Agha assured me that I would never succeed in building a house: "Only if you make a contract with a European builder."

I had not come to the Sahara to build a Côte d'Azur villa, nor had I the means. Rodari's estimates were notorious. My ambition was to live in an Arab house, in an Arab way, and have peace. I promised myself that peace was coming. Already I had the garden. As soon as I had the house I would be at peace, but as I could only build out of earnings, it would take time. A book was a substantial basis. Articles and short stories would contribute considerably. If at any moment I ran short, Ali could cease work. Ali in a curious instinctive way understood this, and that is why for eight years I tolerated him. He was a bad mason. The only thing in which he excelled was in muddling. But he understood my financial situation and thought none the less of me in lean times.

ARAB INTERLUDE

"*Awa!* You have the money, the work goes on. You have no money, I repose until Allah he sends you some."

One day Ali had an idea. He had ideas from time to time. The pavilion presented a picturesque arcaded front.

"Why not put in windows with glass, and a door? Then friends can sleep in it."

A guest-house, in fact!

The flat cement roof had cost a good deal; it seemed indeed a pity not to put it to some better use than merely a summer-house.

"Let there be windows, Ali!"

I was rather tired when I told Ali to order the windows. Not only had the building been exasperating, but the climate of Biskra acted as a drug. On those occasions I perfectly understood the Arabs; even Ali I understood, and what Europeans in their superiority misname LAZINESS. I have never been lazy, it is not my nature, but sometimes I would sit under an olive tree on the terrace of hard-beaten sand overlooking the desert and refuse to take any further interest in Ali, the building, or the missing sacks. I wanted to be alone, not even to read a book, and not necessarily to think, but just to stare into space.

The mere sight of Ali's brown burnous dodging among the palm stems and coming nearer would fill me with panic. He must not disturb me. I could not and would not be disturbed. Ali might reason that, as I was doing nothing but merely sitting under a tree, he was not disturbing me. Sometimes he forced me to concentrate on the business in hand.

BUILDING A HOUSE

There was nothing else to do, when he squatted in the sand opposite me, a filthy note-book in hand and a stub of a blunt pencil. Ali's calculations were long and slow, so slow that my mind had time to wander. Some movement in the desert would catch my eye. A white horseman on a white horse galloping, his white burnous floating out behind—a camel caravan, making its way slowly and painfully up the river-bed—Nomad women in scarlet, screaming children, fierce Kabyle dogs that roused every dog in the oasis, the accompanying shepherd tune on a reed flute—what was Ali saying? I must order more *carlage* for the floor? Four more square yards were required.

"And to-morrow is Friday," he reminded me. "You won't forget the week's wages for the workmen when they knock off at five?"

"Yes, yes."

"And for me, you give me something on account?"

"Nothing. It was agreed that you'd be paid only when the work is finished."

"It is finished. Only four more square yards."

"You promised it would be finished last week."

"It is difficult to calculate exactly."

"If you'd calculated properly you wouldn't have run short. If you'd told me yesterday I could have had them here in time to finish to-day."

"I will finish on Saturday."

"I'll pay you then."

"But to-morrow is Friday—I must buy provisions for the family or we starve. If you pay me only on Saturday then I shall have to go into market on Sunday instead of working. Hafiza says will you and

ARAB INTERLUDE

'Martegreet' come to the house to-morrow? She cooking a dinner for you."

"But if you haven't any money?"

"You will give me some money to-day, enough do the marketing—so I can buy a chicken for t *cous-cous* she is preparing for you."

"Ali—you know I like Hafiza. She is much t good for you. If I didn't like Hafiza so much, wouldn't employ you as a mason."

"She is a very good wife, Allah has been good me. Hafiza loves you as a mother. Martegreet s loves as her sister. You will do her a great pleasu if you come to-morrow. I only ask one hundred fran it is not much considering what you owe me."

Ali was a master wangler; he got it in the en and what's more he knew from the first moment th he would get it because he knew me. It requir time to persuade me, that was part of the day's wor it was like bargaining. A thing wasn't worth buyin if it wasn't worth bargaining for. And so the long we argued and disputed, the more Ali was satisfie He liked to sit under the tree with me, lightn cigarette after cigarette, and gradually overcoming n ill-humour until he had got me to smile at last. T moment I smiled Ali was happy. He had won small sum of money "on account" and we were dine at his house. He left me to my rapidly retur ing lethargy, promising to order the windows wh he went into town. "The windows"—I reflect aimlessly, as my eyes followed the white gallopin horseman in the distance—"let there be window but let me not have any bother about it. I

BUILDING A HOUSE

me just wake up and find it done. Windows with glass!"

I had risen to heights of energy and determination as regards the building of the arcades (oh! those arcades)—and the marble columns which had to be hacked out of the quarry and brought fifty kilometres on camel-back. I had been capable of sustained effort, and now the pavilion was complete, all but the windows. At that moment I slumped badly. I was as one who has smoked opium. I simply did not care what happened next. . . .

When I came to from this phase I inspected the windows that Ali had placed. They were high and narrow, the tops were neither quite straight nor yet round. They were a sort of compromise. I exclaimed in horror, and Ali was disappointed; he said the windows of the houses in town were of that pattern. They were in his eyes perfectly good European windows. I had of course only myself to blame. Rodari refused to take them back. Ali said he could perhaps sell them in the market. What kind of windows would I prefer? Would I please make a drawing to scale?

I showed him a picture in a book on Spain, of a palace at Granada. He agreed it was an improvement on Rodari's design. He thought he could get an Arab carpenter of his acquaintance to make them cheap. He did, and they were approximately the right shape, but when they were closed there was a gap that for ever let in a sand-drift when the wind blew. It was what the French call "Arab work," but the loggia had become a closed room.

CHAPTER XI

A Priest in the Garden of Allah

BEFORE the pavilion was even finished, the first of our friends arrived at Biskra. He was a young American priest who for years had lived in Paris. He was an "ace" at converting, and members of my own family had not escaped. His visit to Biskra created a sensation, for the simple reason that he was the first person in a dozen years to stay in the "Garden of Allah." He was a friend of the Comtesse de Ganay, who inherited the property from her uncle, the Count Landon described by Hichens in his famous book.

Owing to some legal mishandling *The Garden of Allah* was never translated into French. Hardly any one in Biskra knows the story, nor why tourists so persistently and for so many years come to Biskra with the sole object of visiting the Garden. But seriously do their entrance fees contribute to its upkeep, not to mention the benefit to hotels and shopkeepers, that the "Garden of Allah" myth has been exploited to the utmost. The once lovely garden given over to tourists, but the villa and pavilion buried in purple bougainvillia have been closed for years. The garden is dense and overgrown, it sadly needs the eye and hand of a gardener and an artist to restore its charm and beauty. The Arab gardeners

A PRIEST IN THE GARDEN OF ALLAH

dare not interfere. They confine their work to watering and sweeping.

When orders arrived that the villa was to be opened up for a visitor there was tremendous discussion and curiosity. Furniture and carpets were brought out into the sunny clearing before the house, while cleaning and whitewashing proceeded. Creepers were trimmed, pots of geraniums lined the walls, the palm branch fence that excludes tourists from this corner of the garden was renewed and strengthened. The keeper of the garden and all the gardeners assembled at the big white archway to receive the visitor. Father H. was not dressed as a priest, but discreetly in dark grey flannel. The only time he betrayed his priestly calling was when in the early morning, dressed in a long black dressing-gown tightly corded round the waist, he paced the terrace reading his breviary. One morning I dared to disturb his devotions. Together we paced the terrace in the sun. Our discussion, if I remember right, concerned Allah and his works. There was a rustle in the palm branch fence and a woman broke through. It was immediately obvious that she was English, that she was a tourist, and that she was a spinster. In her hand she held the familiar book, her index finger doing duty as bookmark. She stood shyly, contemplating the black-robed figure, who bowed and reminded her as courteously as possible that "this is private."

"Can you tell me—" she hesitated, "I haven't had time to finish the book yet—did—eh—did the monk go back to his convent—for ever?"

"No—but he's going."

ARAB INTERLUDE

There was not a suspicion of a twinkle in the priest's eyes. The woman shot me a glance of disapproval and plunged back through the fence.

It was Father H. who advised me to transform my pavilion into a dwelling-house.

"What do you want a guest-house for? Once you invite friends from England they will never go. You need a house for yourself; add to your pavilion, it stands on the only available site."

It was so obvious, and yet it never had occurred to me.

Ali the Mason agreed that the idea was sound.

Had the house been planned from the outset it would have been very different in design, but I had now to adapt my plan to the existing construction. To the right and left, rooms must be added, which entailed knocking openings in the two end walls. The *façade* was already half demolished in order to gouge out the existing narrow windows and substitute the great arched windows of a Granada palace. In a short time the little building that had once appeared finished was little more than a ruin. The plaster of the inner walls that Ali had taken so long to complete had to be sacrificed. Bricks that had encased the window-frames and been extravagantly cemented were now demolished with crowbar and hammer. It was a discouraging sight, and expensive.

In time—it seemed to me a very long time—the rooms right and left were completed. I then learned that the thing one has drawn in the sand looks very different when it is built up. The proportions are

not what one visualised. For instance, a window that I expected to be quite big was extremely small because I had omitted to state whether my measurements were "inside" or "outside" measurements. It never occurred to Ali that anyone could want big windows. Small windows keep out the heat and the light. An Arab likes a dark room; out of the blinding light he finds relief in the dark. He does not want either to read or write. When I decided to scrap more window-frames—for one cannot abide by one's mistakes—Ali pushed back his turban and scratched his head. Then I decided that the room on the right was too small. We would knock down one end and add to it. It was only when the walls were up that I perceived the necessity of more windows, and the walls had to be pierced again and again. Ali would follow me anxiously round, and whenever I looked thoughtful would remind me: "If you have another idea the house will never be finished."

Ali could certainly demolish quicker than he could build. He was the slowest builder on earth.

"Do hurry, Ali!" I would beg him.

"*Shouia, shouia!*" (little by little) he would answer irritatingly. "Good work is never done in a hurry."

"But you do rotten work and you do it slowly."

Ali would look hurt, especially when I made caustic remarks in front of his workmen, who would repeat them in the café at sunset so that the whole village knew. Men went home and told their wives.

"The *Inglesia* (the English woman) told Ali Slimane to-day that he works badly and slowly."

Hafiza would hear of it through Saulea, the negress

ARAB INTERLUDE

who went from house to house carrying messages and running errands for the Arab women. But Hafiza did not mind, she would laugh softly and agree: "He is slow, he is very lazy. Does he work badly? I will scold him when he comes home."

It was winter and Ali complained of the cold. The mud bricks had to be cemented together with liquid mud. The mud was cold.

"In the summer it will all go quickly. You will see."

Then it rained for a few days and he did not come to work at all.

"One cannot work in the rain," he assured me.

After that came Ramadan, the month of fasting. From sunrise to sunset the Arabs could neither eat, drink nor smoke. They worked listlessly, they looked pinched and drawn, they yawned continually. As for Haafa, he lay about here and there sleeping. When asked for anything he looked vacant and stupid.

They had to turn night into day. The cannon-shot at sunset was the welcome signal that Moslems might eat. The cafés at the end of the day were crowded with jaded figures squatting on rush mats, staring at the steaming cups of fragrant coffee, waiting—counting the minutes, the seconds—for the cannon-shot. A little coffee first, and maybe a handful of dates or a honey-cake, the big meal a little later, and again after midnight. Even at three or four in the morning they were free to eat if they happened to be awake. Europeans were unsympathetic, impatient, devoid of understanding, their idea being that if

A PRIEST IN THE GARDEN OF ALLAH

you can eat your fill at night you can easily dispense with food during the day.

Margaret and I observed closely and were convinced there was no pretence in the Arab suffering, and because we could not understand, we decided that next year we would keep the fast of Ramadan with them.

"Next year, Haafa, we will do it together."

"Insha'Allah," answered Haafa, and smiled wanly; and because he was too weak to do a normal day's work he pressed his younger brother Lazhari into our service.

As I drew more lines in the sand, indicating a bathroom (a bathroom! Ali scratched his head), a kitchen, a corridor, a bedroom facing south for Dick, and finally a guest-room, the problem of building material increased. *Toubes* cost more to transport on donkey-back than their initial price. "If only we could make them on the spot," said Ali, "we would save a lot."

I had an idea: why should not the *toubes* be dug out of the clearing before the house?

Ali objected that a pit would be unsightly, but I insisted.

For some weeks two men up to their naked thighs in mud stamped and squelched about in a hollow that grew daily deeper and wider. They paddled about as if they were crushing the juice out of the grape. The mud had to be a certain consistence and mixed with straw. Then with a little square wooden frame they picked up the mud and flung it like a child's pie to dry in the sun. Every path in the garden was

ARAB INTERLUDE

covered with *toubes*, drying in rows. The sun beating down on them hardened them into brick.

Haafa began using the pit as a dumping-place for refuse. Every time he threw an empty tin or a cigarette wrapping into it I made him go down and pick it out. This had to be done tactfully, for no Arab likes to be ordered by a woman. I never ordered. I always asked as if it were a favour, then they readily did anything I asked. Haafa argued that if the pit was going to be filled in with soil, the "rubbish" would be buried.

"But it is not going to be filled in, Haafa!"

"What! Not going to be filled?"

Ali and the workmen gathered round, Lazhari gaped: "*Le trou—tu bouche pas ?*" (The hole—you won't fill it?).

Ali's brothers asked leave to come and look. Lakdar's brothers came each in turn. Then one day Aïssa Ben Gana arrived. His visits created as much diversion among the workmen as a visit from the Bash Agha.

Ali the Mason, followed by each of his workmen, solemnly came forward to kiss the Agha on the shoulder, followed by the interminable salutation:

"How are you?"

"I am well, and you?"

"I am well. Is the family well?"

"The family is well, and your family?"

"My family is well, *Hamdullah*" (God be praised).

"*Hamdullah*——"

Ali the Mason and Haafa stood expectantly to hear what the Agha would say about the pit.

A PRIEST IN THE GARDEN OF ALLAH

The Agha gave it one glance: "Swimming-pool?"

Alas, no! The Municipal Authorities would never allow me sufficient water.

I led him across the garden to view the house from a distance.

"You see my mistake?"

He saw it immediately: "The house is not high enough."

"As I can't raise the house I must lower the earth. There are going to be wide steps leading down into a sunk garden."

No Arab could visualise a *sunk* garden. Such a thing had never been seen, but he was very evidently impressed by the fact that I was succeeding in getting a house built. I was a woman different to others; he said, "You are half a man!"

One day he told me I was worth two men. That was the highest form of compliment an Arab could rise to.

CHAPTER XII

The House of Slimane Ali

WE now had a good many friends in the village. Three houses clamoured for our visits. They were the houses of Kuder the Red Beard, of Ali the Mason, and of Haafa. All three were branches of the Slimane family.

These Slimanes, I discovered, were of Turkish descent. That is to say they were as dissimilar to the Arabs as a German is unlike an Italian. The village of M'cid had been a Turkish settlement before the French conquered Algeria a century before.

The Turkish character was familiar to me. I recognised in the Slimanes the same pride and obstinacy, the instinct to command, to rule, to dominate. The Slimanes were a tough quarrelsome people clinging tenaciously to their traditions.

Ali's wife, too, was very obviously Turkish, her standard of life was higher than that of the Arabs. Hafiza had grace and a melodious voice, she held herself like a caryatid. She was worthy of a better type of husband than Ali, and Ali knew it, but Hafiza knew it too.

Ali and Hafiza's father happened to be friends, otherwise the marriage never would have taken place. Hafiza had a pretty way of smiling coyly and looking down at her long flexible fingers whenever her hus-

THE HOUSE OF SLIMANE ALI

band spoke to her. It was a most becoming attitude, but it was a mask. Beneath her submissive exterior Hafiza had a will of iron.

Their room expressed her superiority. She would not tolerate a beaten earth floor. Ali had been obliged to tile it for her. They had furniture: a large brass European bed, a cupboard painted with bright-coloured flowers on a background of blue. A flowered material hid the palm branch ceiling and formed a tent-like effect.

Hafiza never went about the house or visited her sisters-in-law. Her world consisted of one small room at the top of a break-neck stair. On a narrow terrace she had a half-open kitchen. It was very difficult to keep two restless children segregated on this small terrace, but Ali's niece, Mahami, whose father was too poor to dress her, was dressed by Ali and in return played nursemaid to the children. Such was the situation owing to endless family rows. Rows are the chief pastimes of Arab women. Incarcerated for life between the walls, sisters-in-law, mothers-in-law, cousins and aunts fight unrelentingly.

The children, too, quarrel in the ordinary healthy normal way, but each mother takes her child's part, and there ensue slapping competitions. When Hafiza's son got slapped by one of the other children's mothers, Ali took up the row with his brother as well as his sister-in-law, and it was decided that the two families should never again mix in the communal yard. The house was a small enough world at best, but Hafiza's world was whittled down to her one room and a narrow terrace. Ali the Mason's house was one of

ARAB INTERLUDE

the largest and more civilised houses of the village. Ali's old father was still alive, who, although he did not know his age, remembered the French conquest. He was therefore a hundred years old when we arrived in Biskra. He was a grand-looking old man, who had been gardener to Count Landon in the "Garden of Allah." He loved flowers and continued to grow them in preference to vegetables in the family garden. He would come and visit me, bringing geranium cuttings and chrysanthemum seedlings. He would annoy Lakdar by criticising the way my orange trees were grafted, or the rose trees pruned. He was generally to be found sitting under an age-old olive tree in the Arab cemetery just beyond our gate. His face was so lined and furrowed, he was so bent, there seemed to be an affinity between him and his favourite tree, and curiously enough when the old man died the olive tree died too. It still stands there on a mound, its leafless twisted branches outlined against the sky. Every year the rain washes away more soil from around the roots, it appears to be still clinging tenaciously to the earth as though it had been overcome by death, and fossilised in a last desperate effort to hold on. So long as it stands it remains a monument to the memory of the old centenarian who so loved flowers. The year before he died he had a great desire to do the pilgrimage to Mecca. He would have been sure then of his place in Paradise. Probably he had a great many sins to be forgiven. His sons, however, refused to put up the money. Two of them, Salah and Hussein, were rich merchants with a date store in the port of Philippeville. But they argued

THE HOUSE OF SLIMANE ALI

that if the old man went to Mecca he would never return. They had no intention of having him buried so far away. He had been bellicose in his younger days, but he was too old now to command.

I was never quite sure how many sons he had, for they did not always live at home, but divided their time between Biskra and Philippeville. Salah was good-looking and had rather an insolent familiar way. One recognised the Arab of the coast, who had come under European influence. He married a common flashy girl from an inland town and covered her in jewels.

Hussein was melancholy, black bearded, white faced and sinister. He never smiled. His bride was a child of fourteen whose shrieks on her wedding night were the talk of the village. Nor did I ever see her smile in all the years that I visited the house.

Another brother was Tayeb, the father of Mahami, but although he was the eldest he was of no account because he did not earn enough to keep his family. In his younger days he had been cook to Count Landon, he knew about French food and European ways. But he had grown querulous and was given to drink. The merchant brothers owned the Arab café next to my garden, where Europeans were brought by guides to view the sunset. Tayeb was put in charge as *cafetier*. He talked good French and the tourists liked to gossip with him. He wore a red handkerchief tied across a blind eye, and looked like a bandit. Although the café gave him occupation he never succeeded in making any money. Eventually the merchant brothers sold the café to me, and as

ARAB INTERLUDE

soon as I pulled it down to build an entrance on the site, Tayeb was out of work, and his daughter Mahami became more than ever Ali's servant and the slave of his children. She and Margaret were the same age, they became great friends and Mahami confided in her. Marriage was Mahami's only prospect of release from an intolerable situation, and she longed to get married. The two merchant brothers were quite ready to come to some arrangement with a cousin, but Ali, who found her useful, made objections to every suitor who was put forward.

Ali's little son used to hit her and she dared not retaliate. He hit his mother too, and his sister. The petulant small Sultan was dressed up like an oriental puppet, and his father worshipped him. Every evening Ali had to bring a present to his son, or if he did not he too got pummelled roughly in the chest by the stout childish fists.

Hafiza preferred her daughter, who symbolised feminine solidarity from a tender age. At times Hafiza seemed dissatisfied. She would question Margaret about the outside world. How was it, she asked, that there was one law for Arab women and another for the others? Why was Margaret free to go about among men without danger of perpetual violation?

Sometimes she looked like death. Her head on its long neck drooped like a flower. Her eyes were lustreless. She would not dress up to please her lord.

Ali was at a loss to understand these moods. She slept badly, he said, and would not eat. He bought her special delicacies from the town. Especially did

THE HOUSE OF SLIMANE ALI

he buy her dresses. Hafiza had more clothes, and finer, than any woman in the village. She had gold bracelets and a red coral necklace hung with Queen Victoria sovereigns and Napoleon III gold louis. Ali spent all his earnings on her. He decked her out on ceremonial occasions like the wife of a Bash Agha. But she was losing interest in life. She lamented to Margaret that her family had not departed like so many of her race when the French conquerors drove out the Turkish rulers. In their own land they had been freed by Kemal Pasha. His portrait in colours, wearing a high fur Kalpak and crowned by Turkish flags, hung on the wall in a shiny gold frame wreathed with artificial flowers.

CHAPTER XIII

A Wedding in the Village

HAFIZA invited us to a wedding in the village. The bride was a relation of the Slimane family, and so it was an important affair. Hafiza surpassed even her rich sisters-in-law in jewels and radiancy. Here at last was a chance to visit another house, to see other women and gossip and show oneself off.

Saulea the negress was in attendance. Saulea was the widowed mother of the village idiot who so ably imitated a Ford klaxon. She was a lovable soul with the psychology of a darkie Nanny. Saulea was *persona grata* in every Arab house. She ran errands, carried messages and helped to bring children into the world. On the eve of a wedding she would bustle about from house to house, borrowing from those who were not invited jewels to lend to those who were. The women were very generous in this matter of loaning jewels. When Margaret attended weddings in Arab dress, Saulea collected so many gold jewels for her that the ordinary big red handkerchief couldn't contain them.

Saulea lived by her errands; those who could afford to paid her in coin. Saulea, however, was content to be paid in kind. She was fed and clothed by almost every family in the village. Hideous, half-blind, tactful and discreet, she would have let herself

A WEDDING IN THE VILLAGE

be cut in small pieces and thrown to the dogs rather than divulge a secret, and she knew some upon which lives depended. Husbands had confidence in her, they entrusted their wives to her on the rare occasions when one of them went out, either to visit a mother, to attend a circumcision, a funeral or a wedding.

With Hafiza accompanied by Saulea we attended our first village wedding. Hafiza was veiled like a story-book ghost from head to foot in a white silk *haik*. She could hardly see to pick her way, and stumbled up the uneven street peeping with one eye through an adroitly contrived crack in her veil. In silence we walked to the house of the bride. The only sound was of jingling anklets.

Arabs have assured me they can judge from a woman's ankles whether she is young or old, good-looking, respectable or flirtatious. Hafiza's silhouette was willowy, her ankles slim. Instead of the usual cotton *haik* she was enveloped in silk like a grand lady.

The men of course celebrated apart. We were not aware of their existence. The women seemed to own the house.

The light was dim, a few candles guttered and a flaring ill-trimmed oil lamp hung by its reflector to a nail on the mud wall. But the flame caught the gold tinsel turbans and the gold and silver patterned brocades edged with shiny metal braids and the jewels.

Everyone sat all over the floor. Children slept on mothers' knees, babies among the voluminous skirts. At intervals negresses would beat tom-toms, and amid rhythmic clapping of hands someone got up to perform

ARAB INTERLUDE

a lecherous belly dance which, amid laughter and applause, was imitated by children.

These were the occasions when mothers of marriageable sons took note of the young girls. There was much whispered discussion among the older women. The girls giggled together self-consciously. They knew they were being appraised, that their reputations were being established; their futures were at stake.

The bride seemed to be the person of least importance. She lay enveloped in crimson brocade sobbing with her head buried in the lap of her best friend. Hafiza lifted a corner of the red coverlet and showed her to me. The sight of the poor young thing weeping as though her heart would break affected me deeply, and I was shocked by the general indifference. I did not know then that weeping was the etiquette. It would be ungrateful to appear pleased at leaving the parental roof. Decency obliged a well-brought-up girl to protest against being handed over to a man she had never seen, a husband who was therefore a stranger. She had never seen any man besides her father, uncles and brother, unless contrary to all rules she had peeped at some passer-by from the roof-top.

When the time came for the bride to be conveyed to the bridegroom's house, her weeping grew louder. Thereupon her brother, braving the sea of female faces, stood among us and shouted gruff imperative phrases at the writhing crimson bundle. Whenever I saw him afterwards on the road, I always recalled his callous harshness that night.

On this occasion Margaret was the chief centre of

A WEDDING IN THE VILLAGE

interest. Dressed in one of Hafiza's dresses and crowned in one of Hafiza's golden diadems, she roused a chorus of approval.

"*Al-Kiff! Zeena!*" (lovely, beautiful!).

Not only did she look oriental but she naturally assumed, with the costume, the manners and deportment of a timid Eastern girl. From that moment her affinity with the Arab women was established. She was hailed as a sister, and ever after treated as one of them. (My resentment of an Arab woman's fate, however, was fiercely aroused and destined to remain.)

Towards midnight a stalwart negress picked up the weeping fourteen-year-old bride like a bundle and carried her to a carriage. Savage yells from the onlookers drowned her cries. The heavily curtained carriage was draped about with opaque vivid striped materials. The bride's mother and sisters and a heap of children piled in with her. I had no idea a carriage could hold so many. Children lifted the curtains as one lifts a tent flap and crawled in from all sides. The rest of us, discreetly enveloped in our *haiks*, formed a procession that followed the slow-moving carriage. Blank shot was fired by the men who walked alongside, the horses plunged and kicked, but owing to their lamentable condition they had not the strength to bolt. Behind the procession of women followed the men. Margaret, who dropped back to remove a stone from her shoe, was roughly pushed forward by an irate old man who mistook her for an Arab hussy trying to attract male attention.

At the door of the bridegroom's house more volleys were fired, the horses reared, the carriage creaked,

ARAB INTERLUDE

the bride screamed, the children and the men shouted, while the women of the bride's party hurried into the house. The bridegroom's family and friends were waiting. Coming as we did out of the night, the scene was dazzling. On either side of the nuptial chamber door glittering colourful groups of chattering women held up bunches of candles in each hand. The doorway had been gaudily painted with arabesques in crude colours. Suddenly a shout went up, the bride was being carried in on the negress's back. She was received with barbaric yells from the waiting women, a yell that is produced from the back of the throat and becomes a trill by tapping your mouth with your fingers. The Arabs describe this particular noise as a *you-you*. In centuries past the women incited their men into battle by the same high-pitched trill.

Before the door the negress halted, laid down her human bundle, scrummaged under the covering and laid hold of a small hand. Into this hand a sword was thrust, with the point of which and the help of a guiding hand a sign was traced above the door to avert the evil eye. After this the bride was lifted up and deposited on a couch that looked like an operating table: a sheet had been tightly stretched across it, and there were no bed coverings. A single flickering candle was the only light. The negress hastily retreated, closing the door behind her.

Except for the privileged few the show was over. The women wrapped themselves in their *harks*, slipped out of the house and found their men waiting for them in the street. As no man could have

A WEDDING IN THE VILLAGE

recognised his woman I conclude the woman recognised her man. At all events there was no confusion, the right couples seemed to gravitate and silently disappear. Margaret and I were invited to wait with the family until the bridegroom came forth to fire the gun-shot that proclaimed the consummation of his marriage.

The night was far advanced. The tom-toms and the dancing ceased. Old heads nodded, little ones cried fractiously. We waited. . . .

Presently the old women began to mutter, the murmurs became a grumble, someone beat upon the bridal door and shouted insults. Hafiza explained to me that the extremely young and the over-aged were clumsy and slow. The right kind of man got the business over in a few minutes. There was a stir among the women. An iron bar was produced and heated over a coke fire. It took time to heat. As soon as it was luminously red someone knocked on the bridal door, there was a gruff interchange of words, the door opened on a crack and the red-hot iron was pushed through. I tried to ask for an explanation, but my knowledge of the language failed me.

At last, weary of waiting, we said good-bye. Out in the street we found Haafa among a group of Arabs squatting on a rush mat sipping coffee and smoking. He got up and followed us to the car at the village gate. Suddenly a reverberating shot tore the still night. Haafa grinned sleepily: "*Ça y est!*" he said in the same phlegmatic tone of voice that he generally adopted to announce that dinner was ready.

CHAPTER XIV

The Pool of Water

OCCASIONALLY Saulea would drop in, sent by some friend to ask for news of us, or to bring gifts with an invitation. If she were feeling chatty and I had the time, it was possible to get amusing stories out of her. She would lower her voice over an indiscretion, pull her veil across her mouth and chuckle like a hen. It was good that she covered her mouth when she laughed, for it was a monstrous sight!

I asked her one day how it was possible for an Arab woman to have a lover seeing that she was so carefully guarded.

Saulea chuckled: "There is no way of preventing a woman if she really means to——"

"How does she manage it, Saulea?"

"He gets over the roof from the next house."

"And the dogs?"

"They can be silenced by something on a piece of meat. When a man is tired he sleeps heavily. The lover can have her as she lies by her husband's side—I have known that happen. On a summer's night when the couple were sleeping on the terrace a man came over the roof, flung his burnous over the husband's head, stuffed a corner of it in his mouth, tied him up so that he was helpless and then took his

THE POOL OF WATER

wife. There was a Nomad in the desert who always held his wife's hand while he slept, but she succeeded in wriggling her body under the tent flap. Her lover was outside and he only got half of her, but for him it was the more important half!"

Such escapades hardly rank as love. On the part of the man it is lust for adventure, on the woman's part it is satisfaction of fooling a domineering male. Occasionally a boy and a girl evolve a romantic attachment in childhood. There are no women in everyday life to distract an Arab man's memory, for a woman nothing to occupy her thoughts but her dreams. Memory assisted by imagination is more conducive to passion than the freedom of Western intercourse. People who see enough of one another may get over it, but those who risk life to meet for a brief moment hardly have a chance of being disillusioned.

Saulea's story about Ayesha and the pool of water (she punctuated it with little mischievous giggles) illustrates a case.

Until Ayesha was ten years old she played in the village street with the other boys and girls. She was very pretty and her hair was twisted into thick braids. Mahmud, the son of the Kadi,¹ was fifteen when Ayesha was ten; in fact a man. His much younger brother liked to tease Ayesha, and one day when Mahmud was passing by, Ayesha was sobbing her heart out. The other children informed Mahmud that his *halouf* (pig) brother had cut off one of Ayesha's braids with a sharp dagger because she would not give

¹ Arab lawyer.

ARAB INTERLUDE

up the packet of sweets that she had tucked inside her bodice. Thereupon Mahmud laid hold of his small brother and flogged him with a stick before all the children. According to Saulea, the little weeping girl stopped weeping. She dried her eyes, which were exceedingly big, and looked at Mahmud.

He went home with Ayesha's braid in his pocket and her big black eyes in his heart. The next day Ayesha timidly offered him her packet of sweets.

One day when no one was looking, Mahmud told her she was *zeena* (pretty) and kissed her. After that Ayesha was on the road whenever he went into town on his white mule. Sometimes he picked her up and rode down the street with her in front of him holding on to the mule's mane. These were memories that remained long after Ayesha had ceased to play on the road.

When she was a big girl and her marriage was being discussed, the stillness of the village street was broken one day by the sharp clip-clop of horse's hoofs. The sound was not that of an ordinary half-dead animal such as the villagers rode into town. Ayesha ran up on to the roof and peeped. She was not the only one. Every woman who heard that horse was on her roof, for a soldier in a scarlet burnous is a worth-while sight. Spahis are fine horsemen and their horses are the best out of Arabia. Riding between the high blank walls of a village street a Spahi is always aware of unseen eyes peeping furtively from the roof-tops, he therefore spurs his mount into what is popularly called a *fantasia*. On this occasion the *fantasia* happened in front of Ayesha's house. The animal

THE POOL OF WATER.

seemed to be jibbing badly, and although Mahmud spurred him on, he also held him back. The bit was severe, the maddened horse reared, shook his head, and foam flew in big white lumps. It seemed as if just for a second the horseman dared to look up. Ayesha recognised Mahmud. Her love for him which had been smouldering so long was fanned into flame. After that Mahmud rode several times through the village.

Ayesha's father had already come to an agreement with Hussein, who had asked for his daughter in marriage. Hussein was old enough to be her father, his beard was grey and his smile a sinister grimace, but he was rich. If Mahmud ever asked for Ayesha, as he promised to, her father never mentioned it, and Ayesha was married to Hussein.

Hussein was extremely pleased with his wife. His jealousy became a joke in the village. He would not allow her to attend any weddings for fear that other women should tell their husbands afterwards that "Ayesha had on such and such—she is very beautiful in her rich dresses and jewels. . . ." He did not mean people to talk about his wife, he meant Ayesha to be dead to all except him.

Ayesha grew listless and pale, and Hussein brought her more dresses, more jewels and more sweets. According to Arab male mentality a woman should be happy who is much loved and spoiled. Ayesha was not happy. It never occurred to Hussein to look for the reason in himself. If a girl has never seen a young and beautiful man why should she be discontented with an old and an ugly one? But Ayesha

ARAB INTERLUDE

seemed discontented. Hussein consulted Fatma, the big heavy negress who had carried Ayesha on her back to the nuptial chamber. Fatma, who loved the girl as her own child—she had assisted at her birth—urged that Ayesha should be allowed to visit her mother. Ayesha was homesick, that was all the matter with her, she was a bit young for marriage, and she had been separated from her mother for several weeks.

Hussein reluctantly consented, but in his heart he deplored the necessity of such a visit, and looked forward to the day when it would graciously please Allah to remove his mother-in-law.

Alone together, Ayesha and Fatma conspired. Fatma promised that—with Allah's help—Ayesha should have one hour of happiness with Mahmud. As Ayesha looked incredulous Fatma explained:

"You have only to tell me the day and the hour—there will be a pool of water outside my door. As you pass by, slip and fall—leave the rest to Allah—only start punctually, for at this season water dries up rapidly."

Accordingly, on a day, Ayesha sallied forth accompanied by her fiercely watchful husband to visit her mother. So opaquely was she veiled that he had to lead her by the hand. He made her walk fast. The unevenness of the road and her smart new shoes hurt her feet.

Fatma, watching from the roof, saw them coming and hurried down. The pool of water extended the whole width of the road, there was no avoiding it. Ayesha stumbled into it, slipped, gave a little cry, and fell full

THE POOL OF WATER

on her back. Hussein stood over her angrily and ordered her to cover her face with her muddy veil. Fatma rushed out excitedly and helped her to her feet. Hussein cursed the habits of negresses who emptied filthy washing water into the road. He vowed it was the last time Ayesha should ever go out. Fatma said humbly: "She cannot go to her mother in such a state. Let her come in and I will clean her."

There seemed no alternative. Into Fatma's house, however, Hussein could not follow; there were women within, she assured him. So he squatted a few paces away and lit a cigarette.

Fatma had fulfilled her promise. Mahmud was waiting. Under pretence of washing Ayesha's *hark* and her veil, she left the two alone. The Spahi enveloped Ayesha in his wide scarlet burnous, and she forgot her morose husband waiting in the street.

Ayesha never reached her mother's house. Hussein took her back home and beat her for having kept him waiting so long.

But it was worth while (and Saulea giggled)—for although Ayesha may never see Mahmud again she now has a baby she adores, and Hussein boasts the beauty of his son!

CHAPTER XV

Going

IN May it began to be too hot to be out after ten o'clock, and I foresaw the moment of forced departure. Ali the Mason promised to work hard all summer so that the house would be ready for us on our return.

My last instructions were to respect any palm trees that happened to be in the building area. I would not have a single one cut down, and had planned the house so that the walls made curves and angles to circumvent them. Ali of course protested; an angle slowed up work. My palm trees were old, he said, they were worthless as date-bearers, but I loved the tall slim stems that swayed in the wind. Ali said they would sway against the house in a storm, he would have to leave a big margin.

With Lakdar I left a sum of money to negotiate the purchase of the small bit of land that cut like a wedge into my garden. Lakdar assured me the plot would be mine before my return. He knew how to deal with *that* family!

Before leaving we had to visit all our friends in the village. Our departure was a revelation of their genuine affection. Zora cried, Zora's mother cried, Ali the Mason's wife cried and her niece Mahami cried too. Haafa's mother had tears on the brim, but so

GOING

had Haafa, his brother Lazhari, and Lakdar the gardener, as well as Hadj the night-watchman. They all invoked Allah's blessing upon us, and his mercy. They hoped we would return and not change our hearts when we got to England. They seemed unconvinced as to our permanence among them. Their belief was in the clan system and the powerful hold of family, race and religion; they could not believe these things were of no account to me. My choice of Biskra for residence flattered them, but they saw in it the whim of a woman who had no husband to guide her. If on my return to England my brother, brothers-in-law or uncles did not detain me I might indeed return, but some day—not far distant—I would have to reckon with my son. They set great store on Dick. They mistook his British superiority complex for filial authority. In the place of his father he was chief of the clan. Some day he would rule his family. The women had intimated to Margaret that she would soon have to submit to his decisions. This did more to set Margaret against her brother than any boyish teasing on his part. Our Arab friends regarded their quarrels as the natural revolt of the female against the male. If Margaret had a father she would be docile and well trained in submission, but Dick was too young yet to assert his authority. Meanwhile, until she had a husband and while Dick was still young, mother and daughter were enjoying a period of freedom that was enviable.

We left Biskra at three o'clock by moonlight on a June morning, to avoid the heat during the desert

ARAB INTERLUDE

part of our journey. Once we reached the mountains it would be cooler. Lakdar sat up with Hadj to see us start. The back of the car was piled high with luggage and Haafa fitted into a small niche. He was coming with us as far as Algiers, which he had never seen, and his excitement was great.

The garden was deathly still, the shadows of the palm trees on the smooth sandy paths were as clear as sepia paintings on a canvas. The noise of the motor seemed to desecrate the night.

We knew the road would be bad to Bousaada, which is half-way to Algiers; for 180 kilometres we would be in the desert, but I had a sublime confidence in my car, in my driving and in my luck.

After four hours of intense concentration on the road's surface by moonlight, by half-light and finally by sunlight, my eyes were tired. I ventured to look further ahead than the nose of the bonnet. We were descending a steep ravine into a dry river-bed that had to be crossed; I did not notice the fissure in the road caused by recent rainfall. Our right front-wheel dropped into it, the bottom of the car jarred against the ground, the machine vibrated to the cracking and splitting of steel. When we had crawled out of the fissure I stopped the engine, we glided down the hill and came to a stop in the middle of the river-bed. When I tried to get the machine into gear there was not a spark of life; Haafa was tragically apprehensive:

"Won't be able to go to Algiers?"

I assured him that Margaret and I would get there even if we had to abandon the car in the river-bed.

GOING

We had our reservations on the boat that was to leave Algiers on Saturday at midday. It was now Thursday. We had plenty of time, but we needed it. After the first shock of horror at our situation, we envisaged a day and a night in the desert.

Our food provision consisted of six hard-boiled eggs, a loaf of bread, two sardine tins, and some cherries—sufficient if carefully rationed. We had, besides, one bottle of water. When that was exhausted we would have to drink from the muddy pools in the rapidly drying up *oued*.

The calm that descends upon one on such occasions is truly comforting. Haafa retired to the shadow of the cliff and slept. Margaret unpacked her manicure set, and I read Trotsky's recently published memoirs.

Midday was painful. The sun beat down upon the canvas hood, which seemed to be the only shade in the Sahara. The bonnet of the car was too hot to touch: I trembled for the tyres.

The hours passed by tediously. It seemed to us an eternity since we had started. Rescue was only a matter of time, but we speculated as to the nature of the rescue, and wondered how soon the eagle-eyed Nomads would discover us. They invariably appear out of space. Arabs of the oases are kindly and hospitable, but Nomads of the tents are poor people who live in the same conditions as the Berber shepherds before the Roman conquest—they are imbued with the lust to loot.

This year especially they were more than ever poor. A locust plague had devastated the crops from Egypt to Morocco and a drought had destroyed the flocks.

ARAB INTERLUDE

The price of sheep had already fallen by half. Our loaded car would be a sore temptation.

The afternoon shadow was well advanced when an old Arab on a donkey came across the river-bed. He asked questions in a gruff voice. Haafa answered him according to our instructions:

"No, we have not broken down, we are simply resting!"

He asked for food, I regretted we had none. Then Haafa inconsequently asked: "Do cars often pass along this track?"

"Maybe two a day and sometimes not one for three."

"How far are we from Bousaada?"

"Starting at dawn on a camel a man would not get there before night."

Seeing that we had nothing to offer he continued on his way.

Later in the day Haafa went in search of his camp to ask for water. He was away a long time.

"Supposing," said Margaret, "they have knocked him on the head to take the money he has on him?"

Suddenly a flock of sheep and goats appeared, followed by two or three young shepherds for whom we seemed intensely interesting. Margaret asked if I had the revolver. I had not, my excuse being that the last time I tried, it would not fire.

"You had it at safety," she said acidly. I knew all about the safety gadget and it wasn't that, but I didn't argue; if we had to die together we might as well be on friendly terms! I unpacked a knife from the picnic basket.

Margaret proceeded to write her diary with ex-

GOING

quisite detachment, as if it were the most normal thing in the world to be sitting in a car in the middle of a river-bed in the Sahara at dusk, and I concentrated on the life of Trotsky with beating heart but every outward appearance of calm.

The shepherds got up on the running-board and seemed nonplussed by our indifference. When they made it impossible for us to continue to ignore them I explained that we had a Monsieur with us who was somewhere "over there"—and I looked back to see if he were in sight. Then Margaret called an imaginary "Jacques!" and I called "Henri!" whereupon the shepherds got down from the car and urged their beasts up the creek.

Haafa returned at last with a bottle filled with fresh water and the news that the omnibus from Oulad Djelal was due on the morrow. We settled down for the night—Haafa inside the car to guard it, Margaret and I in our burnouses on the sandy river-bank under the sheltering cliff. Margaret produced a small lace-covered pink-satin pillow! I folded a rug under my head. The night was hot. There were ants and mosquitoes. I wished the Nomads had not seen us. They began to assume the proportions of a regiment in my mind. I saw dark-faced, white-draped forms emerging from every shadow. I strained for sounds and detected imaginary ones. Frogs, crickets and night birds broke the stillness. I cursed the full moon that revealed us so distinctly. The car was a great black blotch with shiny silver high-lights. I dozed fitfully, awoke with horrible suddenness and a sensation of panic. I revolved in my mind how we would

ARAB INTERLUDE

proceed if attacked, then gathered comfort remembering that a fortune-teller had predicted me a long life.

It was a horrible night, but Haafa slept soundly and long. At dawn he had to be shaken and pushed to wake up. There was nothing to wake him up for except a piece of dry bread and a glass of water, but it irritated me to see his open mouth.

When towards nine o'clock the hum of a motor engine, faint and unbelievable at first, grew into a certainty, we all three ran up the creek to meet it. The omnibus was laden with Arabs and an official French couple travelling in Algeria under the auspices of the home government.

The Arab chauffeur sensed remuneration and unscrewed our floor-boards. The steel fan was broken and the iron frame bent within which it revolved. He proceeded to remove large stones from the interior mechanism.

At the end of an hour, during which the Arab passengers were very patient and the French couple very indignant, the iron case had been hammered more or less into shape and the broken fan revolved noisily. The engine started and we got away. But instead of a purring six-cylinder we made a noise like an old tin Lizzie. After a while we got used to the noise, confidence returned and I ventured to go faster. We pursued for hours a seemingly endless road that was utterly deserted.

In the full heat of one o'clock we came to Sidi Khaled, a tiny oasis cut in two by a wide shingly river-bed. It was full of water. A group of noisy,

GOING

laughing Arabs watched us plunge in and stick! If we would pay them they would push us out, they said. Of course we would pay them. They pushed, but the car merely sank deeper into the fine gravel bottom. I got out and paddled about. The water was fresh and cool. As I could do no good I was content to wait, knowing our friend the omnibus would eventually turn up.

When it came at last it stuck right alongside us. The ill-humoured Frenchman besought the chauffeur /to attend to the bus and not to me, but the Arab had received a hundred francs and was my friend for life. He said: "Have no fear, I won't abandon you. I'll get you out before I get myself out!"

The French lady, more amiable than her husband, observed: "What courage you have, Madame, to motor alone in this country."

"Ridiculous, not courageous!" snapped the Frenchman.

After about an hour of futile pushing and discussion, the local population produced a great wooden beam. The idea was to lever up the car and place big stones solidly under the wheels. The levering merely raised the body and not the wheels. I saw my car coming in two; it would be the end of the springs. The mechanic was nonplussed. "What can I do?" he groaned.

I suggested, "Get your lever under the hubs."

It was the end of the lovely shiny metal hubs. They were crumpled into lumps that looked like tinsel paper, but the plan succeeded. Stones were placed under the wheels, they gripped—hesitatingly at first, and then the sixteen-horse-power conquered.

ARAB INTERLUDE

The car sprang forward on to solid ground. A cheer went up. All that remained to be done was to distribute *largesse*. I had no change and consulted the friendly mechanic. He confided my fifty-franc paper note to a small boy who ran with it to the village. When he reappeared and handed a fistful of coin to the mechanic, the smiling laughing Arab faces suddenly turned murderous with lust for money. They did not mean to have it distributed, the strongest meant to get the lot. I thought the omnibus driver would be lynched, but he was a big strong man and unafraid. He struck out right and left, calling them *haloufs* (swine). A man with a pickaxe threatened him.

Margaret said: "They won't dare touch us and we may save him. Come on!"

We plunged into the crowd and pushed them roughly, but it was the prestige of the French language spoken threateningly that made them waver for a second. In that second the driver broke away and reached his omnibus. His passengers rallied round him like soldiers round a general.

"The *haloufs*! The thieves! The murderers!" he gasped. "For behaving in such a way they shall get nothing. . . ."

The strongest was the bus driver. He meant to keep the whole of the fifty for himself, any excuse was good enough! Seeing him surrounded by his passengers, the others hesitated, and as we turned back to our own car they followed us. They were evidently undecided as to the most likely means of getting money. The Arab mechanic was a tough nut to crack,

but the two foreign women might be induced to pay a further sum. I had no intention of opening up my bag in front of that mob. The engine was throbbing, Haafa had climbed back into his niche among the luggage, I jammed the gears and pressed the accelerator. In a jiffy we were away, tearing across the open. The omnibus was still stuck in midstream—we never saw it again.

At sunset we came to Bousaada and stopped at a garage to fill up with petrol. The French garagist looked at us wonderingly as we filled up our water-bottle at his tap and drank.

"From Biskra?" he commented. "They say the track is bad. It was all right eight days ago, but there's been a storm since. What? Pushing on to Algiers to-night!—H'm—Few people do Biskra—Algiers in the day, but when women make up their minds to do a thing!"

We explained. "We hoped to do it in a day, but we've already spent one night on the way——"

"At Sidi Khaled?"

"No, in the middle of an *oued*!"

He shrugged his shoulders: "Oh, *Mesdames*!"

At midnight we were encircling the mountains that separate the desert from Algiers. Haafa was fast asleep, his head wedged between two suit-cases; Margaret dozed fitfully; I sang, never suspecting I knew so many songs.

Margaret asked huskily: "Are you singing because you are happy or because you enjoy the noise . . .?"

"To keep awake!" I answered gruffly.

"You're keeping me awake. . . ."

ARAB INTERLUDE

"Talk to me, for God's sake, or we'll be in the ravine!"

She roused herself. "I say! . . . Not quite so fast round those bends!"

We reached Algiers at two o'clock on Saturday morning. At midday we caught our boat!

CHAPTER XVI

. . . and Coming Back

DURING the ensuing summer months every available penny was sent back to Ali the Mason. £60 out of the £75 of my quarterly widow's pension went to him in June and September. Then Margaret and I assembled our trinkets, all the baby jewellery she had received at her christening, and we realised £50 on it. For this I promised her that our Biskra home should be hers in my will. (I little guessed that some day when she married a Frenchman I would give it to her as a wedding present) The bank allowed me to overdraw, and Butterworth paid me £100 on account for *Nuda Veritas*. Small sums with which to build a house. From time to time I received disconnected letters from Ali telling me of the progress.

He enclosed long, detailed, phonetically spelt lists of how he had spent the money. Having warned him finally of our impending return, I received a reply which, meant to be reassuring, left me in doubt as to whether I should find a house to live in or not:

“DEAR FRIEND,—I have finished the ceilings, and am working on the plaster.

“I hope to send you a photograph of the whole house, you will be very pleased to see it so beautiful,

ARAB INTERLUDE

you will say. That is good work! You must be patient to obtain *good* work. You know building is hard, especially in summer. I pray you not to give way to anger.

"The house is nearly finished as you may know since I am doing the final plaster. You must be very patient, to have such a beautiful house.

"At once I am going to begin to plaster the walls of your room.

"Hafiza sends you thousands of good wishes, for you, your two children, as well as your mother and brother. She wishes you good health and happiness and a safe return to our land of Biskra.

"Please receive from your good friend Slimane Ali his sincere salutations."

Early in October we embarked at Southampton in a steamer bound for Algiers. My trunks were more full of tulip and lily bulbs than of clothes. The children had insisted on bringing a pink-and-grey parrot, four fantailed pigeons, two angora rabbits, and a pair of love-birds.

Throughout the journey my mind was surging with pictures of the finished house. MY house, my very own—in another year it would be smothered in bougainvillia. I visualised the wonderful new life that stretched before me. A life of pure abstract beauty. Such beauty, such peace, such dawns and sunsets, such moonlights. Hot nights filled with the scent of all the flowers that would grow in my garden. Paradise on earth after all our wanderings and anxieties. An end of striving, an end of material

. . . AND COMING BACK

effort. European Nomads come to ground at last in a Nomad land.

As we drove up to the big wooden doors that gave access to the garden a group of Arabs from the village came forward to welcome us. Lazhari—taller, lankier, impish as ever—bolted up the garden path to fetch Haafa.

Biskra in October is hotter than the hottest August day in England, but with a touch of spring. After the devastating summer heat, the first autumn rains bring vegetation back to life. If it rains sufficiently in the mountains a flood thunders down the river-bed. When we arrived the flood was but a stream, it made a pleasant trickling sound over the stones and boulders. The garden was aglow with yellow chrysanthemums.

We were enjoying the thrill of HOME coming, when Ali the Mason nervously gave us greeting and the news that the house was uninhabitable. His face betrayed his guilt. He had not worked, it had been too hot, he said. (In winter it had been too cold.) Then Haafa appeared and his face bore an expression of ill-omen: Lakdar had died ten days before our arrival. Someone had butted him in the stomach in a dispute over the distribution of water. He had, however, secured the wedge-shaped bit of land for me. Nejma his widow had the title-deeds. Ali was already working on the kitchen extension.

Having surveyed the unfinished house I turned back sadly to the gate, drove the car back to Biskra town and deposited our luggage at an hotel. That

ARAB INTERLUDE

evening at the café in the "Place" our Ben Gana friends rallied around us welcomingly.

News of us was carried to the Bash Agha. He was more amused than surprised, took pity on our disappointment and invited us to stay in his house until our own was ready.

CHAPTER XVII

Origin of the Ben Ganas

THE history of the Ben Gana family is partly the history of Algeria.

A Ben Gana had the title of Sheikh-el-Arab (Chief of the Arabs) under the Turks as far back as 1637. In those days, until the French conquest in 1830, the chiefs and heads of tribes were continually at war with one another. Their wars were personal and they never lacked a following. Firstly because the tribe has a sense of loyalty to its chief, secondly because the Arab dearly loves to fight. But for the French, they would be at each other's throats to-day. How wistfully do my friends of M'cid look across the river at the little oasis of Filièche, and sigh with longing to "have at it"! For them, Filièche is as foreign as France is to the German.

In 1762 Mohamed Ben Ali Ben Gana headed a great caravan of pilgrims for Mecca. In those days the pilgrims grouped themselves for safety under a supreme command. The main caravan was joined by smaller caravans from different localities. Ali Ben Gana owed his designation of "Emir Arrakbe" or Chief of the Constantine Caravan to his generosity, for he was very rich and undertook the expenses of the poorer pilgrims.

In the old Arab writings he is referred to as "the excellent Sheikh, who so ably directs the Arabs, and

ARAB INTERLUDE

whose word is listened to and accepted by the Turks. The Ben Ganas, thanks to Allah, are accepted and loved by all the Governors. Their great fortune is the result of all the good wishes (!) of right-thinking people. May Allah direct them in the path of sublime sentiments and of virtuous actions."

On their return from Mecca the pilgrims sent a delegation to the Turkish Bey begging him to transfer the chieftainship of the southern territories from Bouakkaz to Ben Gana. The Bey, who had a grievance against Bouakkaz, was only too pleased. Accordingly he divested Bouakkaz of his title of Sheikh-el-Arab in favour of Ben Gana, which gave rise to an undying feud.

To protect Ben Gana and reinforce his authority a garrison of Janisseries was established at Biskra. But while Ben Gana was maintained in the oasis, Bouakkaz held his own in the desert. From time to time their hostility broke into open warfare. Eventually the Sheikh-el-Arab Ben Gana was killed, and according to Arab account "is now among those in Paradise who rest in the shadow of sabres."

In May 1830 the French attacked Algiers and the Bey sent an appeal to the chiefs of all the tribes, begging them in the name of Islam to group themselves under their tribal chiefs and join the holy war in defence of Algiers. The Ben Ganas with their cavalry responded immediately, but the traditional enemy Bouakkaz revolted rather than serve under Ben Gana's command.

After the conquest of Algiers and the deposition of the Bey the Turks fell back on Constantine in con-

ORIGIN OF THE BEN GANAS

fusion, and as they only maintained themselves in North Africa by terror the Arabs rose in revolt on the first news of French success. Tribal warfare was generally confined to the winter months. At the first sign of summer the Ben Ganas were accustomed to trek north to their property in the Tell, the mountainous country round Constantine. Until the autumn there would be a truce, but the Ben Gana who left a Caïd to represent him at Biskra usually found on his return that the Caïd had been bribed by the Bouakkaz, and so a new war would begin. To maintain a semblance of legality a few heads were cut off and sent as a present to the Turkish Bey to pretend that his interests were being fought for, and the Bey distributed reward accordingly.

What finally brought the Ben Ganas over to the French side was the attempt of the Pasha to force them to stand by him in the north beyond the autumn. Everyone knows that when the time comes for the flocks to go south to the winter grazing nothing will induce the Nomads to remain in the north. The Ben Ganas broke away, taking their Nomads with them, and the very next day sent emissaries to General de Negrier offering their submission. The month was December, the year 1838. (The French had already been eight years in Algeria.) The submission of the all-powerful Ben Gana tribe was an event of great importance. General Galbois, in his report to the Governor-General of Algiers, describes Bouaziz Ben Gana as "the most important man of the province. His arrival in Constantine created a sensation. He was accompanied by about thirty nobles

ARAB INTERLUDE

of the Djerid and the Saharis, most of whom had never before been to Constantine and who have all protested their devotion to France."

The following communication from the Governor-General to Ben Gana is preserved in the archives:

"From the Maréchal Count Valée, Sultan of Algiers—in the year 1253 (1837–38) to the very noble, very honourable, very glorious Bouaziz Ben Gana, Sheikh-el-Arab; (May Allah be merciful to him). . . . I have to tell you, that it is with the greatest joy and pleasure that I learnt from General Galbois, commandant of Constantine, your request to serve the French government, knowing that your rank is of the highest, all I ask of Almighty Allah, is that you should serve His Majesty the King with absolute fidelity, and complete devotion. . . . As the Ben Gana family is one of the most important since ancient times, it is the desire of H.M. that it continue to be so. I have therefore instructed General Galbois to present you with the insignia of Sheikh-el-Arab. . . . You know, of course, that as soon as fine weather ushers in a cloudless sky, the French will advance further into the country, that is to say, they will penetrate far into the interior. Do not fail to serve with intelligence and devotion, and WRITE TO ME OFTEN TELLING ME WHAT YOU NEED. That is all I have to say. I salute you."

In October 1839 Prince Philippe d'Orléans landed at Stora (known ever since as Philippeville) and wrote the following account in his diary: "I put foot to

ORIGIN OF THE BEN GANAS

earth near the Roman ruins, and was received by General Galbois and all the great chiefs of the Province of Constantine. They are the finest and most beautifully costumed Arabs I have ever seen. Under their very fine *haks* they wear waist-coats and tunics embroidered in gold and silver, and have magnificent inlaid guns. Their burnouses are of different colours embroidered and fringed. Their horses, harness, and bridles are covered with gold ornaments—their horses' hoofs are stained with henna, according to the latest fashion.

"The four great chiefs: Ben Aïssa, Chief of the Sahel (who twice defended Constantine against our troops), Ben Hamlaoui, Caïd of Ferdjious, the Caïd Ali, Chief of the Haractas, and Bouaziz Ben Gana, Chief of the desert, expressed to me their great devotion and loyalty to the King of France. They seem to be very much touched that the eldest son of the King should have come to visit them, and I believe they are preparing a very brilliant reception in my honour.

"They have two hundred horsemen and camels, elegant tents, standards, etc. The Chief of the desert (Bouaziz Ben Gana), especially, has a most remarkable following. His family have governed the Djerid country for 600 years, and he brings with him eighteen desert chiefs who acknowledge the authority of France."

The next day, October 13th, in the presence of the whole garrison, the Prince, in the name of His Majesty King Louis Philippe, decorated Ben Gana with the Cross of the Legion of Honour.

ARAB INTERLUDE

The French conquest did not end all further fighting. The desert was by no means pacified. In March 1840 Bouaziz Ben Gana fought a famous battle called Salsou, which definitely established his family's prestige in the eyes of the French.

In a letter to General Galbois, Ben Gana described the battle as "so intense, that the smoke from the powder obscured the light of the sun. Allah gave us victory. 450 soldiers were *entirely* massacred, not one of them was able to escape. Of that fact there can be no doubt. We captured two cannon, three standards, two drums, ten tents, and all the enemy's baggage, as well as their mules, camels and other methods of transport. Ben Azzuoz fled as soon as he saw our forces bearing down upon him. As for OUR followers, scattered about the field of battle, they incited one another to carnage, and did not retire until the last enemy soldier had been killed. We owe this victory to our lucky star and the protection of Allah. We are your children, and we will serve you to the end with absolute fidelity.

"BOUAZIZ BEN GANA."

Nor was this the last of the tribal wars, fought now in the name of the Kingdom of France instead of for the glory of the Ottoman Empire!

In May 1843 the Duc d'Aumale, who was commander of the Province of Constantine, spent a month at Biskra. When he left, the Sheikh-el-Arab Ben Gana, with the rest of his relations and dependants, their followers and horsemen, took part with the Duc in a

ORIGIN OF THE BEN GANAS

punitive expedition against the Ouled Soltans at the foot of the mountains. In his report of June 2nd the Duc d'Aumale describes how every evening the Ben Ganas returned to camp with their mules and horses laden with the enemy's grain. While he was thus engaged, Ben Gana's rival, Ahmed Belhadj, organised a revolt and murdered all the French officers of the Biskra garrison. (Among the detailed accounts of that night, the archives of Biskra record the "sad fate of Marie Morati, a young *cantinière* of the garrison, whose life was spared, but who was carried off into captivity by the Khalifa, who forced her to become his wife. She had two children by him and did not recover her liberty until 1860.")

Two days later the Duc d'Aumale, having received news of the massacre, returned with his squadron and rushed upon the oasis at full gallop. The Khalifat fled precipitately and the Duc remained in Biskra to reorganise the system of defence. He decreed that, besides a strong garrison, the French commandant should rule politically as well as administratively, and that the Arab chiefs should work under the orders and in conjunction with the French commandant. The system prevails to this day.

In 1849 the last King of the French was deposed and the Republic proclaimed. The Republic was not supposed to be strong enough to hold what the armies of the King had conquered. From June to November the fate of the French colony hung in the balance. The Ben Ganas remained loyal. Only when General Herbillon took Zaatcha by storm and captured the

ARAB INTERLUDE

rebel chief Bousiane, was the French cause saved. The rebel leader's head was carried as a trophy on the end of a bayonet. His eighteen-year-old son, having been made prisoner, was about to be led off into captivity when Mohammed Seghir Ben Gana cried out: "The wolf cub shall not grow into a wolf," and so the boy's head also was stuck on the point of a bayonet.

The war of 1870 provoked yet another insurrection. Once more the Ben Ganas fought for France, and the fighting continued up till 1879. The name of Bouakkaz, cited among the rebels, maintains the traditions of a family feud that began in 1768.

When the revolt was finally suppressed, Bouaziz Ben Gana was decorated with the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour.

In 1879 a false prophet called Mohammed Ben Abderahmane preached a Jihad (Holy War). Revolt began in the Aurès, that chain of mountains which relays the sunsets across the sands, and bathes Biskra every evening in a luminous afterglow. The mountain race are a tough people descended from the Romans, they were the last to submit to French authority. Revolt spread from mountain to desert. The Ben Ganas called up their cavalry, and the final stand took place on the 19th of June 1880 at Zeribet-el-Oued. In this battle Ben Gana lost twelve cavalymen and thirty others. Mohammed Ben Abderahmane fled and peace reigned until the Great War.

In 1916 at Ain-Touta, the little town which lies on the road to Biskra from Algiers, the French préfet,

ORIGIN OF THE BEN GANAS

with his wife and the administrator, were murdered, as a result of trying to force conscription on the natives. There were uprisings over a distance of 250 kilometres, and it was feared that it might spread over the whole of Algeria.

Colonel Fournier, Chief of the Biskra garrison, acknowledged that calm was maintained in the desert throughout the War owing to the loyalty of Bouaziz Ben Gana (known to-day as the Sheikh-el-Arab). He was decorated Commander of the Legion of Honour in December 1916.

I have gathered together these fragments of history to form a kind of drop-scene to the Ben Gana family, who are as regal in tradition as any family who ever occupied a feudal throne. When one surveys their past it is easier to understand why, every year, Bouaziz Ben Gana is received with honour and banqueted by Ministers in Paris.

On the 1st of January 1929 the title of Sheikh-el-Arab that had been bestowed by the Turks upon his ancestors was revived in favour of Seyd Bouaziz Ben Gana Bash Agha des Zibans, "*pour récompenser son loyalisme et sa fidélité à l'égard du glorieux Gouvernement de la France.*"

Henceforth Bouaziz ceases to be the Bash Agha and I shall refer to him as "Sheikh-el-Arab."

CHAPTER XVIII

Behind the Scenes

THE Sheikh-el-Arab's guest-rooms were in a cloister separated from the main house by a courtyard. The walls were hung with vivid home-woven carpets. These covered the floor also, and camel-hair rugs to match covered the beds. The dining-room was in this cloister, and next to it a little anteroom where we all met before meals and had coffee after. It was lined with the same crude decorative carpets which formed *portières* to the entrance, and covered the low wide settees that bordered the wall. In this prismatic setting the Sheikh-el-Arab received the various people who had been asked to lunch. There was generally a Caid or a Sheikh from some outlying oasis, a *Marabout* (Holy man, descended from the Prophet), sometimes a French officer, a municipal official, a passing tourist with a letter of introduction, a merchant from Algiers or Constantine, and some of his relations. Whenever he had to introduce us, he always added that Margaret and I were "of the family," which surprised the official French, and mystified the passing tourist. His sphinx face discouraged questions or remarks.

In the mornings the Sheikh-el-Arab was always busy. His courtyard was generally full of men with a grievance and appeal or a report; some waited

interminably. With patience and resignation these would settle down in a sunny corner as though eternity lay before them. Others would be admitted to his *bureau* where he worked with his secretary Abdellah. Abdellah was so blond he looked like an Englishman in fancy dress. In fact, I have seen Englishmen who were far more convincing in a burnous than Abdellah. He was well educated, one might almost say cultured, and indispensable to his Chief.

After lunch the Sheikh-el-Arab retired to the harem, where he was as completely lost to the outside world as if he were dead. In the evening "His Majesty" liked to be amused. When there were no guests we were made to play a game.

This consisted of blowing a small ball into holes on a board. It required neither cerebral exertion nor technical skill. Each hole scored different points. The highest score belonged to a hole so constituted that the ball trembled on the brink, invariably rescued itself, and meandered on hesitatingly—amid fearful tension, shouts, cheers or groans. Whenever I was his partner the Sheikh-el-Arab, who delighted in metaphors, gave interpretation to every movement of the ball. One moment he saw me trembling on the brink, success was probable but not certain; I was undecided, capricious, fearful—I might escape—make a dash for freedom—but he was certain of the ultimate result, and when finally the ball did fall into the all-important hole he was triumphantly jubilant.

Abdellah with Margaret for partner went through the same emotions. But it happened occasionally that

ARAB INTERLUDE

our hosts fell into our hands. To avoid such a situation they were prepared to cheat if necessary.

It was all rather childish, but it "passed the time" as the French say.

While we were the Chief's guests we got to know his family pretty intimately, and I was able to unravel after a while some of the relationships.

The Agha Aïssa was the Sheikh-el-Arab's cousin, but also his brother-in-law twice over. He had almost as much authority, though less power. He was even more decorative. Aïssa had a sense of humour that was almost Irish. He was regarded as somewhat of a poet, and a visionary. His young cousins complained that whereas they had to exert considerable effort to attract women, Aïssa had but to pass by and they fell for him on sight.

There was an English spinster who wore an ostrich feather in her wide-brimmed hat, and flat-heeled shoes. Every winter she brought Aïssa a piece of her family plate. Beneath the English crest she had his name engraved and the year. The teapot represented the first year, the milk-jug the second, the sugar-bowl the third, the tray the fourth, the kettle the fifth, and so on. Aïssa proudly poured tea from the English tea-set that had lost all suspicion of its silver origin, and might have been assumed to be pewter.

The Sheikh-el-Arab having claimed us as "family" we were accepted as such and invited into the women's quarters. Here a whole new world was opened up. One learned to accept the Arab viewpoint and to look at life through Arab eyes.

WOMAN was a sacred subject, the mention of a

BEHIND THE SCENES

name was a desecration and worse; it was the equivalent of undressing her naked to the world. One could hardly talk about a wife with her husband, or of a sister to her brother. One emerged from the women's quarters rather self-consciously without comment. If occasion required that one should mention the name of a female relation, one instinctively dropped one's voice as though it were an indecency.

There were one or two houses that were open to us whenever we liked to go, but others where it was necessary to ask permission.

Even so, one did not ask if one might visit Mira, or Tissa—as the case might be—but “May I visit THE FAMILY?”

When my mother came to stay with us she was invited by Ali the Mason to visit his wife. The next day, in front of the workmen, she began to compliment him upon Hafiza's beauty, mentioning her by name. Ali's face became suddenly rigid, the workmen turned away with embarrassment and I besought her feverishly in English to be silent!

With Aïssa Ben Gana I dared to be just a little indiscreet. I knew him better than the others, and he enjoyed the impropriety of discussing with me the girls of the family. He knew of their existence, and which of them was supposed to be good-looking or plain, fair or dark. There was a sister of one of Aïssa's cousins who was of marriageable age, to whom none of the family would consent to be betrothed. She was tall, slim and graceful. Her small head was set on a long neck. She had huge black eyes, dazzlingly white teeth, and her skin

ARAB INTERLUDE

was the colour that sunbathers try to attain on the Côte d'Azur. The girl was so wistful, so conscious of the indignity of being nineteen and unmarried, but word had gone round in the family that she was dark-skinned. For Arabs whiteness, like virginity, is essential. These discussions entertained Aïssa until one day the impropriety came a little too near home.

I had made friends among the innumerable females of his household with the young divorced wife of one of his cousins. She was divorced because she was barren. She might have shared her husband with the second, child-bearing wife, but she was jealous and made scenes. Aïssa, being her nearest of kin, was obliged to harbour her. One more or less in the women's quarters made little difference to him. She loved to listen to all I could tell her of her ex-husband. He happened to be rather unruly, had a schoolboy's sense of humour, and was inclined to drink. I saw him one night at a party with his turban awry and his eyes gleaming mischievously, flinging loaves of bread at the guests. The Sheikh-el-Arab's scowl, however, restored even the drunken man to sobriety. The ex-wife laughed joyously over stories of her husband's misdeeds, and ventured through me to send him a message. It was quite a harmless message of greeting: "Allah's blessing, she hoped he was well, she never forgot him, she was lonely without him. . . ."

At a later date my knowledge of Arab psychology would have saved me from delivering the message, but in these early days I still had much to learn.

The husband listened and smiled, like a collie dog that shows its teeth and leaves you in doubt as to

BEHIND THE SCENES

whether it means to bite or not. The next time I visited Aïssa Ben Gana's household I found a very subdued ex-wife. Her message had been repeated by her husband to Aïssa, and Aïssa was furious. If she were not satisfied with the hospitality of his roof, she could leave it, he said, and join the women next door—a good enough threat, for every woman in the family knew the deplorable conditions of “next door.”

Aïssa's house adjoined that of his nephew, who was the double of the King of Spain, in fact he might have been Alfonso XIIIth disguised as an Arab. He had inherited considerable property from his father, was unmarried, and monstrously neglectful of his sisters. They languished in a filthy back-yard amid slaves and starving dogs. Life held no interest for them apart from their brother. They awoke in the morning to an empty day. They had not even the cooking to superintend, for invariably “Alfonso” lunched with one or other of his relations. The months and the years succeeded each other, and they grew a little older, a little sadder. One of them would remain in bed for days, with no incentive to get up. The other squatted in a corner and grew fat. They could of course neither read nor write, neither could they sew. They had heaps of servants to attend them. The only exercise available was a climb up a steep stairway to the roof, which was surrounded by such a high wall that it was only possible to see the crests of the tallest palm trees against the sky. There were little carved apertures in the wall, through which one might, through one eye, see something in a

ARAB INTERLUDE

direct line. There was no prospect of marriage for either of them. They were the victims of a generation that had produced a surplus of female children. They might not be given in marriage to any outsider, however rich or desirable. On certain feast days they put on their jewels and their fine clothes, sat in a dark room from which the discoloured plaster was falling, and waited for the formal visit of Aïssa their cousin. On the feast of Id the Sheikh-el-Arab paid his annual call. He could at least testify that they were still alive. "Alfonso's" bouts of fever were a welcome distraction, and gave them something to do in the nursing line. When the Biskra winter was over they would be put into a limousine with windows shut and curtains drawn and be driven by their brother up to their farm in the mountains. It was a case of exchanging one prison for another. Even in the remote country, where the only neighbours for miles around were their own relations, the women were still subject to the same strict incarceration. No outings, no walks, no change of scene. A yard, a terrace, a high wall, and overhead a square of blue.

The listless creatures came to life when Margaret, gleaming with health, vitality and good spirits, set them laughing with her stories—laughter that reverberated between those hollow walls as in a mausoleum. She brought news from one member of the family to another, and told them all that their brother and cousins were doing in the town.

One of their great amusements was to dress Margaret in Arab clothes. The disguise was amazingly convincing. Her dark Irish type was adapted to the part,

the only trouble was her short hair, which her friends deplored. They contrived to braid thick strands of black and red wool on to the short ends. Ear-rings were another problem. Arab ear-rings are heavy and long, no head-dress is complete without them. Margaret's ears were not pierced. The ornaments had to hang from loops round her ears. The result, however, was so successful that the Agha, seeing the apparition emerge one day from his brother's house, literally gasped with horror, and the servants in the yard fled that it might never be said they had looked upon the face of a Ben Gana lady! Margaret's laughter dispelled the horror of the situation.

In those days Dick had the entrée of the various women's quarters. The women, as connoisseurs of the young male species, approved of Dick. They saw his possibilities.

The Arab woman's attitude to the male sex is a paradox. She hates him as a master, loves him as a lover. There is a female solidarity opposed to male supremacy, but subconsciously they worship the male. From the moment a boy is born he is made conscious of his sex. Mother, grandmother, aunts, slaves, derive a sensual delight in kissing the male portion of a baby's anatomy. When he cries he is soothed (or excited, according to opinion) by caresses which certainly transform a lusty cry of temper into a whimper. If a father wanted his little boy to look bright and animated, his hand strayed up under the child's shirt. The reflection was not in the child's eyes, which remained blank and lustreless, but in the twitching of his mouth. This sex stimulation, combined with in-

ARAB INTERLUDE

tensive interbreeding, an annual depleting fast, and the exigencies of the climate, produced a listless adult incapable of effort.

A fanatic who dreamed of a free Arab kingdom said to me in an outburst of despair:

“When will a Moslem leader arise among us?”

I said: “Never, so long as your sons are bred by undeveloped women shut up in back-yards.”

CHAPTER XIX

Slaves and Masters

IN these days when there is so much talk about slave liberation and the mission of the white man, it is interesting to glance at Algerian conditions of life one hundred years after French occupation.

It is probable that, left to themselves, the Arabs would have evolved some slight emancipation for their women. Their present fanatical attitude is almost in defiance of the French. They mean never to let it be said that they were modernised by Europeans. Educated Arabs have agreed with me that the present system is out of date, but that it can only be altered through one of themselves. In Turkey emancipation was imposed by Mustapha Kemal. No European Conqueror could have westernised Turkey as Kemal has done, and Algeria is still waiting for its Kemal.

The French claim to have abolished slavery, but the term "slave" is still commonly used by the Arabs in reference to a black servant. The Sheikh-el-Arab is said to have 300 women and children in his household. They are unpaid, but adequately fed, housed and clothed. The wives of his retainers are the "slaves" of the ladies of the family. The offspring of servant marriages are, to all intents and purposes, the slaves of the future generation. Each Ben Gana

ARAB INTERLUDE

child has his or her child slave. They are of the same age and grow up together. Playmates at first, they evolve eventually into slave and master. A really attractive slave, whether black or white, is at the disposal of her lord, and as the lord is a fine figure of a man, kingly, generous and just, the situation of concubine is envisaged as enviable. When in due time he has had enough of her, she is married to one of the retainers, and so the tradition of a great house is carried on.

No woman in the Sheikh-el-Arab's household is discontented. Not one of them would be willing to exchange her condition for any other. The little negress who serves coffee with wide-eyed solemnity is as completely a slave as any slave of tradition. She is simply a chattel, but a well-fed, well-dressed chattel. She stares at the Sheikh's guests, noting every detail that can be of interest to the ladies behind the scenes. If she did not properly "observe" she might indeed be scolded, but those little negresses are shrewd, well-trained observers. The Sheikh-el-Arab's wives and daughters on every occasion know the details of a European guest's clothes, her jewels, her manner of speech, the Chief's attitude towards her, whether he laughs or talks seriously with her, how she is placed at table, how much food she eats, and who else of the family talks to her besides her host. A negress of ten or twelve years can take in a situation as she walks across the room. She also observes invisibly from every vantage-point.

A Caid of the Laghouat region told me that when he needs slaves he merely motors to the Moroccan

SLAVES AND MASTERS

border and asks for unwanted nigger children. He has more offers than he can load up into his car, and for a few francs. Taken young, they are easily trained for domestic service, soon forget their homes and every idea of ever going back. They live under better conditions than those into which they have been born, and are perfectly content.

A Frenchman, resident in Algeria, told me almost the same thing in the same words. It was worth while, he said, to make a trip into Central Africa in order to bring back a black couple. They work for their keep, and the offspring, bred and trained in their master's service, form part of the household possessions. Blacks, he said, work well and are honest; they are as devoted as dogs. It went without saying that he treated them well. They would never leave him, for they could not get back to their native land.

If this is not slavery, then may the French invent a new name for it, as well as a scheme for preventing it.

Every feast of Id the Sheikh-el-Arab gave a new dress to every woman and child of his household, besides his family. The choice of materials and colours, etc., was entrusted to Zooka, the Jewish seamstress. Zooka was a person of superb and immense proportions. In Biskra the Jewish population have a Biblical aspect. The women wear a kind of national dress. Every Saturday, which is their Sabbath, they parade in beautiful Paisley shawls over their long ample dresses of velvet or bright brocade, with fringed handkerchiefs round their heads. While still young and handsome, they grow

ARAB INTERLUDE

enormously fat. Zooka was a shapeless mountain, and I often wondered how she was able to walk at all. She made dresses for every branch of the Ben Gana family. This in itself was such an immense *clientèle*, it left her no time for any other. I often met her coming out of a Ben Gana house where she had been to submit to the ladies patterns of new brocades from Constantine. Even where the slaves were concerned, she consulted individual tastes. Before the feast of Id her room was piled high with gay dresses, and she worked hectically, assisted by all her relations. They plied their sewing machines in every corner as well as in the corridor. The Sheikh-el-Arab's patronage was Zooka's living. She was useful to the ladies of the harem in other ways besides dressmaking. She ran errands, carried messages, assisted at births and deaths, gave advice when it was sought, and in fact did for the Ben Ganas what Saulea the negress did for the village of M'cid. The incarcerated Arab women provoked her pity. Like Saulea, she was consciously superior by virtue of the freedom of her race.

The Sheikh-el-Arab was the only one of the family who had two wives. They each bore him a child every year, and once there were twins. I think he had about 16 children when I was last at Biskra. An Arab never counts his daughters. He will tell you that he has, say, five children, and (as an after-thought) two daughters. If you remark "But that makes seven," he will shrug his shoulders.

The Sheikh-el-Arab took a second wife because the

first one, at the end of two years of marriage, had failed to produce a child. But he was fond of her, and had not the moral courage to tell her of his intended second marriage. He pretended the Governor-General was coming to visit Biskra, and a feast must be prepared. Accordingly his wife organised and superintended the endless food courses and the making of honey and almond cakes. When that evening he brought his bride to the harem, his first wife fainted.

For a year her door remained closed to him. When the second wife produced a baby, the first one was so consumed with jealousy that at the end of the following year she managed to do likewise, and has never failed to do so every year ever since.

The eldest boy, when I first knew him, was a glum overworked lad. The Sheikh-el-Arab entertained the strange theory that during his educational years he must have no recreation or amusements. He was not even allowed to ride a horse. His father's severity reduced him frequently to tears. At about sixteen he emerged from this unhappy state and took his place most sedately as future head of the family. His brothers held him in awe, the servants fawned on him, and he drove his two-seater Chrysler with great dash. When it was outworn his father gave him a new car, and yet another. Emancipation of women may come to the next generation, if this young chief, imbued with Westernism, refuses to marry a traditional purdah'd girl.

Although the Sheikh-el-Arab stood by his family loyally to the world, they knew what to expect if they outraged the proprieties. If, for instance, a

ARAB INTERLUDE

French official reported that a Caïd was exploiting his Caïdship for his own ends, the Sheikh would punish him by transferring him to some very poor inaccessible oasis.

An awkward member of the family was Salan, the Sheikh-el-Arab's half-brother. Nearly all Arab chiefs have half-brothers, sons of their fathers by a slave. Their status is hard to define. They live parasitically on the family, and are treated as confidential stewards. Salan, however, was a relation to be reckoned with. He combined the virility of his Nomad mother with the looks and breeding of his father. He had also his mother's dark skin, in contrast to the Ben Ganas, who were very white, and this enhanced his savage romantic appearance. An English tourist lady said to me wistfully that she thought Salan the most beautiful man she had ever seen. He knew the value of his Ben Gana blood, and exploited it to the full. He wangled Caïdships, and exploited those too. Wherever he was appointed as Caïd a groan went up. He was in every case removed in time to avert a revolt by a starving people, from whom he had extracted their last substance. He rode magnificently, and had a wild success with women. They, however, were disillusioned as soon as it was evident that he must be given rather extravagant presents!

Sometimes Salan was prosperous, at other times completely down and out. He swanked a good deal in his two-seater. For want of a better occupation, it was the custom among the younger generation to meet the Algiers train and inspect the tourists as they

arrived. That night they *might* (that was the great game) scrape acquaintance at the Casino. Certain open-air cafés under the mimosa trees in town were rallying points. Salan, like some of the others, would drive his car round the square, and stop before the café as if he had come from a long distance. Every Arab knows the effect he creates on tourists fresh from Europe, who have dreamed of *seeing* the Sheikh of fiction. It is perhaps not entirely the fault of the Arabs if they lend themselves to cheap exploitation. The Ben Ganas had no occupation, and seized whatever distraction came their way.

One year an American girl fell abjectly in love with Salan. We used to see him, late in the afternoon, driving her out to the dunes in his two-seater. The "dunes" are the sand-hills a few kilometres south of Biskra; they serve a useful purpose, especially when a full moon creates a pretext for a night visit. In the dunes couples can be lost to sight and sound, it is a dramatically impressive desert background. To be seen driving alone with an Arab to the "dunes" was a song without words, and provoked a smile in those of us who knew our Biskra.

Salan was notoriously indiscreet, and boasted his successes. As it happened to be Ramadan, which meant that woman, food, drink and tobacco are forbidden until sunset, I said to Salan:

"You cannot hear the cannon-shot out there in the dunes, and last night was cloudy, how did you know when the sun had set?"

He answered: "I held my watch in my hand."

Picture the lovers waiting palpitatingly for the

ARAB INTERLUDE

minutes and seconds to liberate the Moslem conscience!

For a time Salan was banished from Biskra because he conspired with an enemy tribe. His banishment to a distant oasis, the Caïdship of which was financially worthless, brought Salan to heel. He journeyed back to Biskra and humbly sought audience of his brother, who kept him waiting for weeks. Nor would he finally forgive him until the unfortunate man had gone down on his knees to ask for it.

Apart from the Sheikh-el-Arab and the Agha Aïssa, the Ben Ganas were pathetically weak, interbred and riddled with malaria. In appearance they were deceptive, the burnous gave them breadth and the *geynour* gave them height. They looked stalwart, but they were utterly devoid of vitality, more inclined to lie on a mattress on the ground than to ride a horse. There was always much talk about riding with us. They had magnificent horses because horses are an Arab tradition, but they were seldom exercised. They stamped and pawed the stable floor, a stable that was seldom if ever cleaned, and horses seldom if ever groomed. Servants were as lethargic as their masters; this lethargy, although it complicated social relations, had my sympathy. I have always disliked being tied down to engagements. I would like to be able to answer an invitation in Arab fashion; that is to say:

"Thank you, I will come IF I AM DISPOSED" ("*si je suis disposé*"). In other words, if on that day at that hour I feel like it and have nothing better to do! In an Arab it means: If he is feeling well enough,

if he is not laid low by fever or not too tired to get into his car and drive it a couple of kilometres.

Europeans imagine that Arabs are endowed with unusual physical strength. This is a fallacy, but they have two supreme qualifications: In spite of their lethargy they can always make love (I never heard of an impotent Arab), and even the most physically degenerate has strength to hold a horse. Agha Aïssa, whose tapering fingers any woman would have been proud of, could control the most impossible horses seemingly without effort, although driving a car fatigued him.

Margaret once staged a film for a French girl who had a cine-Kodak, and I acted as operator. It was a desert burlesque based on the classic Sheikh theme of abduction. "Alfonso" and Abdellah in their gala clothes acted their parts to perfection, up to the crucial moment. It was then revealed that neither of the Arabs was able to carry off his girl. Nor could their combined efforts succeed in lifting Margaret off her feet. The scene ended in hysterical laughter.

Superior physical strength in a woman is a most disconcerting quality. A defensive attitude is not unbecoming, it is sometimes necessary, and does not necessarily imply a desire to humiliate a man. Once I had to defend myself against an Arab who had great natural dignity. I did not exert my strength, I gave him ever such a little push, but he went down like a ninepin. His humiliation filled me with embarrassment.

I remember an Arab in Algiers who came to my rescue when I had a punctured tyre. He exerted all

ARAB INTERLUDE

his strength to unscrew the wheel, but in vain. I insisted on trying, and the screws turned at once. I felt positively apologetic and explained that he must have loosened them for me.

These are incidents that one never forgets and that are painful to recall.

Margaret maintains that it is essential for a woman to disguise her intelligence, but I think it is even more essential to disguise one's strength.

CHAPTER XX

Decoration

AS soon as Ali the Mason had fixed a front door to our house we moved in. The only finished room was Margaret's, but it was big enough, Ali said, to contain a family: "No unmarried girl ever had such a room. Why do you not send for your mother, it is big enough to contain her too."

Margaret's room was not only vast, but full of variety. An archway had been hacked out of the end wall to give access to the enlargement. On account of the palm trees that I would not allow to be cut, the walls assumed fantastic angles. Margaret's bed, on a raised dais surrounded by windows, was a combination of Genghis Khan's tent and Carpaccio's picture of St. Ursula.

I had bought up the Turkish tiled floors of an old house in Algiers that was being demolished. Ali the Mason complained they were uneven; he could not understand why I did not prefer the nice new smooth tiles made by Rodari. He treated my precious Turkish tiles with scant respect, and my rage whenever he broke one seemed to him out of all proportion to the damage.

"It's only an *old* tile," he protested.

"They cost ten francs apiece, Ali."

"*Awa!* You could get new ones for less than that at Rodari's."

ARAB INTERLUDE

My passion for old tiles became so well known that when the Ben Ganas did up their houses they presented me with the old tiles they had thrown out.

Eventually my room had a peacock blue and green shiny *faience* floor. My bed, like Margaret's, was in an alcove, and above it a carved window of geometric design inset with sapphire and ruby glass. The sun reflected the colours on to the wall, which acted as a sundial; I could tell the hour when I woke by the position of the luminous pattern.

In those days I had so much uninterrupted leisure that I undertook the most elaborate and intricate work in the spirit of a mediaeval monk. Contrary to the American adage that time is money, the Arabs maintain there is all the time there is—and because they say so, eternity seems to be at one's disposal. It was this abundance of time that led me to embark upon decorating my walls. The work absorbed two full years.

The design was inspired by a Persian carpet in a museum at Stamboul. It represented vines and orange trees entwined. I had been told that the Persians inset mirrors into their walls. I inset coloured glass. The glass lozenges were backed with tinsel and set in the plaster like a mosaic, glass grapes and oranges were linked up to a painted branch or a vine trail. Exotic birds hovered among the blossom. Every inch of space was filled by a leaf or a tendril, outlined in gold. It was as elaborate and intricate as the interior of a Persian cassone.

DECORATION

A Hindu merchant from the town said it reminded him of a palace in Russian Turkestan!

As soon as a piece of the wall was complete it became evident that no sort of furniture could adapt itself to such decoration. Next to the big orange divan a folding Koran-stand for my bedside books was all that I could allow myself. I called in Ali the Mason.

"I must have a dressing-room," I said, and indicated a place in the wall where he must pierce a hole. Ali pushed back his turban. For weeks, he said, I had bullied and grumbled, scolded and complained. He had worked over-hours to please me. The room was finished at last. It was a large room, large enough to contain all the cupboards my clothes could ever require. If I chose to take a husband there was room for him too. The room could be divided into two and still there would be room enough. There was even room for more children. I tried to explain to him style and design, but all Ali understood was that owing to the workings of a female brain (a woman's brain should never be allowed to develop), the room so recently finished was going to be partially demolished.

The villagers on their rush mats in the café listened to Ali's tale, and I knew better than to grumble during the ensuing weeks when mortar, cement and plaster splashed my precious *fatence* floor.

During the two ensuing years the only furniture in my room was a brass tray on folding feet, upon which stood innumerable china bowls, each containing a coloured powder. Every night, while Margaret read

ARAB INTERLUDE

aloud, I boiled gum arabic in a saucepan over an oil lamp. This, mixed with a certain proportion of water, formed the medium for my paint.

Standing on a step-ladder—and later, on a scaffolding—I worked by the light of an oil lamp and a flickering candle.

Haafa would stand staring up at the bit of newly painted wall. Lazhari would squat in the middle of the floor and exclaim. "*Accarabi!* Madame can make a bird!"

Ali the Mason did a most unusual thing; he brought his wife to look.

The Sheikh-el-Arab declared the house was a "*petit Palais des Mille et Une Nuits*," and Agha Aïssa invited me to paint a room in his house.

While I lay on my back painting the ceiling the paint ran down my arms, dripped from my elbows, candle grease guttered on to my clothes, gold paint made blobs on my face—they were happy hours.

When tourist friends asked me if I didn't find the evenings rather long I showed them my room.

In the end, when it was finished (Margaret said the scaffolding had been there long enough), I painted my name in gold in a corner of the ceiling, *Hamdullah* (thank God!), and the date.

Every morning when the rising sun blazed through the orange curtains I awoke in the fiery glow, and waking became a never-ceasing thrill. I would lie and contemplate a curving branch, a shaded leaf, the gleaming fruits, the poise of a bird, and it seemed to me the most beautiful room in the world.

DECORATION

(Years later, when European dramas lured me back, Margaret surmised that the African phase, like so many others in my life, was over, and ordered my room to be whitewashed. Haafa wept: "Madame spent two years painting it," but his protests were in vain. Margaret had grown up and gone modern.)

CHAPTER XXI

Bathroom and Kitchen

WE lived most uncomfortably. So obsessed was I with colour schemes and decoration, carving marble columns and painting walls, that I neglected the kitchen. I have always shelved the things that bored me. The kitchen was a bore and the bathroom was a problem. In a very short time they both forced themselves upon my attention.

Ali had completed what to the eye was a very fine bathroom indeed. A large enamel bath was built into the wall, and a porcelain wash-basin stood impressively in a corner with shiny chromium-plated taps; but there was no running water. I had applied to the Maire for a water concession and met with a blank refusal. The Sheikh-el-Arab, who was on good terms with the Maire (they had been educated together at the Algiers Lycée), interceded on my behalf. This was the Maire's opportunity: An Englishwoman, settling in the French colony, had placed herself under the protection of the Arab chief. She had never asked for the official protection of the French Republic, let her now muddle through as best she could. The Sheikh-el-Arab could command the Arabs, but he could not command the French.

There was nothing for it but to bring water in buckets from the village pump (a man was hired for

BATHROOM AND KITCHEN

the purpose), pour the water into a zinc tank, and then pump it up into a tank on the roof. Daily pumping ensured us a modest water supply. The lavatory could be flushed on the same lines. Unfortunately, owing to uncontrollable Arab waste, the town only allowed the village two hours of water a day; it was then cut off at the main. During those two hours the village pump trickled so slowly that the filling of buckets took all of two hours. Carrying the heavy buckets from the village cross-roads to the house was hard work for a half-starved Arab. Not one would do it for long, and each demanded a rate of pay higher than the last. In the intervals of finding a new starving Arab who would be willing to draw water at a reasonable price we were without water.

But the difficulties did not end here. The problem of pumping was not less than the problem of water carrying. Arabs hate pumping. The steady mechanical process exasperates them. They are incapable of sustained action. Haafa and Lazhari took turns. Haafa's turn was merely a gesture, he made use of his primogeniture to order Lazhari to carry on. Lazhari pumped just as long as Haafa was watching, and he pumped as if he were keeping time to a jazz tune. The pump groaned and squeaked, water squirted out of every joint, nuts got loose and dropped off, were sometimes picked up and replaced upside down. The plumber came out from Biskra on a bicycle time after time to mend it. If he were not immediately available, a couple of buckets were placed in the bathroom for our requirements. Even when for a week or so

ARAB INTERLUDE

the cistern was full and water flowed through the bathroom cold tap, nothing ever flowed through the hot tap! I had invested in an expensive water-heater such as one meets in out-of-the-way places on the Continent. The *chauffe-bain* had come from Algiers with a guarantee, and the firm's workman (not Ali) had installed it. The first time that Haafa lit it, the bathroom looked like a woodshed, but the fire roared most efficaciously. When Lazhari lit it the bathroom seemed to be on fire. Everything was hot except the water. Indeed there was no water. While Haafa hastily raked out the fire, Lazhari was dispatched to the roof to inspect the tank. He returned with a triumphant smile—the tank was empty!

There was a general conference in the yard to discuss the problem. The boys were joined by El Hadj, who sometimes lent an unwilling hand at the pump. Nasser, who had replaced Lakdar as gardener, Ali the Mason with his turban pushed back, and Ah's workmen joined in the circle sitting on the ground. It looked like a council of war. The facts were that "Madame" had to have a bath EVERY morning. Not Madame only, but after her "*Martegreet*," and after "*Martegreet*," whenever he was at home, Dick also! Madame required that her bath should be at least *half* full. "*Martegreet*" had to have water up to the point where it overflowed with a gurgling noise down a hole.

The whole thing would be simple enough, if the Municipality would only grant a water concession, and why should they not? In the heart of the oasis was the big villa of the Count de Sinetti only recently

BATHROOM AND KITCHEN

completed, and look at the water concession he had! Why should the Maire refuse Madame what he had granted to the Count? Was it because the French hate the English? No, it was because Madame was well known to be the friend of the Arabs. Why could not the Sheikh-el-Arab do something in the matter? And the Agha, was he not a Municipal Councillor? But no, the Sheikh-el-Arab could do nothing with the Civil authorities. His collaboration was with the Military. Now if only the village of M'cid were under the Military instead of Civil jurisdiction, Madame would have anything she asked for. The Civils were rotten with jealousy and graft, but the Military were decent straightforward people. One could trust the Military—and to think that just across the river-bed Military territory extended right away to the South, the rest of the Sahara in fact. But this was Biskra—should the village of M'cid collect signatures and appeal to the Maire for Madame's water concession? *Awa!* What did the Municipality care for Arab signatures? But the village pays taxes does it not—yes! Pays taxes, and for what? For a road that is impracticable after a rainfall. For an unlit unpatrolled village street, where on a dark night a man got hit on the head and robbed of his burnous. Into whose pocket did the tax disappear . . .?

The voices grew louder, more raucous and more excited. It seemed as if a rebellion were being launched right away.

Dick happened to be at home on holiday and settled the matter. What was easier than to pierce the wall, insert a wide pipe and pour boiling water

ARAB INTERLUDE

from outside into the bath? Hadj could boil the water in a cauldron over the fire that he always lit for himself at dawn.

Thus it came about; and even when years later water was at last laid on from the town, our bath water was still boiled in a cauldron in the back yard and poured through a hole in the wall into the bath.

But the kitchen. . . . Ah, the kitchen, with its futile European range! The price of coal in the Sahara is prohibitive. Wood is also expensive. Arabs are used to cook over a small coke fire contained in an earthenware pot. Haafa had a series of earthenware pots full of glowing coke; on the kitchen range, on the window-sills and on the floor. He also made extensive use of a "primus." This was a form of pumping that appealed to Lazhari. He pumped until the blue flame leapt and roared. He could take it to pieces, probe it with a cactus thorn, shake it, fill it, overfill it so that it overflowed and burned all over.

From time to time I made desperate efforts to improve the kitchen. The floor was tiled as well as every available ledge and shelf, so that the primus should not set the place on fire.

In the hopes of maintaining order I had a gigantic cupboard built the whole width of the end wall, with a dresser above it. Ali had enlarged the kitchen so that it covered the wedge-shaped piece of land that Lakdar had secured for me before his death.

It was spacious and light, a model kitchen, I thought, and dismissed it from my mind.

We always breakfasted in the garden, and it was

BATHROOM AND KITCHEN

there that Haafa would discuss with Margaret or with me the day's food. As time went on and I got more absorbed in my writing, Margaret undertook the housekeeping. She admitted that she "looked into the kitchen" whenever she went to the yard to saddle her horse, and that the stable smelt sweeter. I threatened to "go and see," but she advised me not to. This provoked me and I went. (The smell . . . returns to me as I write.) The walls of the newly whitewashed "model" kitchen were blackened by a hanging oil lamp that flared because the wick was never trimmed; the tiled floor had been washed with dirty rags; dish-cloths, monogrammed towels, old discarded shirts, and bits of material stained and blackened, accumulated in a huge osier basket meant to contain logs.

On a peg hung what appeared to be Haafa's entire wardrobe. As soon as I had flung his best embroidered Sunday suit into the middle of the floor, complete with azure shirt, canary tie, burnous and tassled fez, and ordered him to take them back to his own house, I embarked upon the cupboard. Having flicked off the ants that swarmed over the sugar and the bread—all the bread, bread varying from a week to a month old, bread that required a hammer to smash it—I extracted a variety of boxes. Apparently nothing that was ever thrown away got further than the kitchen cupboard. The contents of all the waste-paper baskets of weeks had been emptied into it. Boxes from every shop in town were piled high with empty face-cream pots, bottles of every shape and size, pots with and without lids.

ARAB INTERLUDE

"Why?" I asked.

There was no answer.

Nothing is more irritating than passive resistance accompanied by a sulky face. Haafa would be transformed into a sulky, stolid lout, while Lazhari continued to grin. Both attitudes aroused all the worst that was in me. Had Haafa argued, had Lazhari explained, my anger might have subsided; but no explanation, no excuse, no apology was forthcoming.

I opened a large cardboard box swarming with ants from which seemed to emanate the main stink. It contained heads and wings of locusts. I stared at Haafa—he stared back.

"I know," I said, "that you like eating locusts, that locusts are a treat, that it is not every day locusts come our way. . . . It is ten days now since the locust cloud disappeared, at least a week since any locusts have been available in the market. These heads are certainly eight days old. How much longer do you intend to keep them? Why do you keep them at all? Why when you've finished eating locusts don't you throw their legs and wings and heads on the rubbish-heap? You might as well keep old cutlet bones and chickens' heads. . . . Yes, why don't you preserve chicken and pigeon heads? Why *don't* you? . . . Why *do* you? . . . WHY DID YOU? . . . WHY, WHY, WHY?"

As there was no answer I flung the box of rotting locusts at Haafa's head, and because Lazhari laughed I made him pick them up.

There was another box in a further recess. It contained socks. Socks in every degree of putrefaction.

BATHROOM AND KITCHEN

"WHY [I hold up a filthy torn rag] . . . if they are finished don't you throw them on the rubbish-heap? If they are not finished, WHY don't you wash them? If you are keeping them to mend, WHY doesn't your mother mend them? WHY, WHY, WHY?"

There was no answer.

I insisted. "Haafa, answer me; I WANT to know."

Haafa mumbled something inaudible.

I sent Lazhari to fetch the wheel-barrow and told Haafa to cart the lot down into the river-bed, dig a hole and bury them.

A little later, from a point of vantage on the projecting terrace, I saw a glinting, glimmering heap of rubbish. Already the neighbour's dog was rummaging among the débris. Soon every dog in the oasis would be on the spot, and what fights there would be. Haafa was sent for.

"Haafa! I told you to BURY the stuff. I said: 'DIG A HOLE!'"

CHAPTER XXII

Feud

MY Arab life would have been incomplete if it had not included a feud. The story of that feud covers eight years. My enemy was Kuder Slimane the Red Beard: unfortunately it involved the friendship of Zora.

On my return from England I went to see Nejma to condole with her on the tragic death of Lakdar. I found her in a windowless room on the ground floor, light filtered feebly through the door from a courtyard that was half-roofed over. She was shortly expecting a child. Zora crouched close to her in the dark. They were like a couple of frightened wild animals caught in a trap. Kuder, in order to assert a legal right over the widow and orphans' heritage, had asked Nejma in marriage. When she repulsed his advances he picked up his blunderbuss and aimed it at her. The shrieks of Zora had brought the other women on the scene and Kuder had been forced to retire. In vain I tried to assure Nejma that he never meant to shoot but only to intimidate. There was not a woman in that house who did not believe that Red Beard would shoot. What he had hoped to gain by legal means he meant now to gain by craft and intimidation. Nejma was entirely dependent upon





Margaret (*left*, in the sitting group, and *top*, in the standing group) with her French friend and two sheikhs who acted in our film and failed so lamentably in the abduction scene !

him. Hamid was too young to administer his father's share of the date plantation, it was therefore Kuder's duty to sell the harvest. He kept the proceeds to defray their expenses. He gave them no clothes and barely enough food. As his wife he would have provided for Nejma decently, for he was a proud man, but a widow was merely an encumbrance.

As for the document that entitled me to the bit of land, Kuder had seized it with everything else that had belonged to Lakdar. In his suave manner he informed me that the land I had paid for belonged by deed to Lakdar's children; he meant to hold it in trust for them until they were of age. As the kitchen had already been enlarged on to this bit of land, he believed he had it in his power either to make me pay *his* valuation or oblige me to demolish my kitchen. It was a grand blackmail. I remained outwardly calm, shrugged my shoulders, and left his house. He immediately went to the Kadi (Arab lawyer) to consult him how best to extract money from me, big money! The Kadi, at all times willing to meddle in any affair in which he might win a share, was afraid of Europeans. He declined to act, and sent Kuder to the local French lawyer. The Frenchman knew all about the Arab before he arrived, and when the blackmail plan was laid bare Kuder was told abruptly to "get out!"

Meanwhile, hearing vague rumours of Nejma's plight, of her persistent refusal to marry her brother-in-law, and of his ill-treatment, I went to the village schoolmaster, who was Nejma's brother: It was his *duty*, I said, to take his widowed sister into his house.

ARAB INTERLUDE

He said he had offered to, and that Kuder had even agreed to let her go, and Zora too, but Hamid was beyond the age of a mother's jurisdiction and Kuder declared he would retain Hamid. Rather than be separated from her son Nejma preferred to starve in Kuder's house, but she never went out of her dark room, the only place where she felt safe. Although an Arab may be a tyrant and a dominating factor in the household, there are certain conventions to be observed. In the communal part of the house Nejma was fair game, to her own quarters he could not follow her. Her room was her recognised sanctuary.

After her child was born I found her in the same dark room, and tried to argue with her. For Zora's sake, I said, she should get out. Her brother would be kind to her, I myself would be able to visit her freely and help her. But Nejma had been in the Slimane house ever since (as a girl of fourteen) she had married Lakdar, and she could not see herself living in any other. The world is full of timid undecided people who cannot help themselves, and Nejma was one of them. I got quite angry with her. For a moment she wavered, promised, and sent me to her brother to make the necessary arrangements. It was decided I should fetch her in my car the next day. She changed her mind as soon as I had left, and when I went to fetch her nothing would induce her to move. She just sat on the mat with her baby at her breast, and rocked in misery, emitting strange sounds as of a wounded animal.

My only means of communication now was through Saulea. I could no longer set foot in Kuder's house,

FEUD

for I had turned my back on him when he offered to shake hands in front of the village café.

Saulea, having reported that Zora was not getting enough to eat, brought her every morning to have breakfast with me. The child ate ravenously, and took back the remains in a red cotton handkerchief for Hamid when he returned from school. She was very pale, and had lost her spirits. She had the frightened gazelle look. I tried to win her confidence, but my questions only seemed to terrify her. She hugged me and pressed her cheek to mine in eloquent silence. Meanwhile Haafa joined the Slimane feud on my side when Kuder ordered him, as a member of the Slimane family, to leave my service. Upon his refusal Kuder used his prerogative as head of the clan to remove Haafa's sister Fatima to his house under pretext that Haafa was too young to afford her adequate protection. Haafa's mother wept. She was a lonely widow, the boys were never in the house, and Fatima was her sole companion. One day she veiled herself and went boldly to Kuder's house to demand the return of her daughter, but Kuder refused to let the girl go. Nor was it simply blind revenge on Haafa for his disloyalty, Kuder had a perfectly good reason for keeping Fatima. His younger brother Mostafa had just finished his military service and desired to marry, but had no money. Normally it cost 4000 frs. to take a wife. Even the poorest Nomad had to endow his bride with some sort of a trousseau and jewels. These jewels were the young couple's capital, in times of need they could always be sold. A gold bracelet had its standard value, and even a silver bangle could

ARAB INTERLUDE

be counted on to fetch its price in weight. But Mostafa spent whatever money he had or earned on kiff. He was a tall good-looking fellow, smiling and charming when he was not frenzied. It was against the law to smoke kiff, but the French could not prevent it. There were secret places where Arabs smoked kiff just as the Chinese smoke opium. It was less potent than opium, but in excess it did finally send men raving. Fatima was rather bovine and high-shouldered, but Mostafa could not and did not complain; he got her as a gift, and one does not look a gift horse in the mouth.

Haafa protested at this handing over of his sister without endowment, but as he was under age his protest was of no account.

The wedding was the crudest and most brutal I ever attended. There was no waiting that night. Mostafa came out of the nuptial chamber and fired the gun a few minutes after he had gone in. His friends waiting for him in the street congratulated him loudly. We who went in to see the bride found her lying inanimate on the couch, staring with glassy eyes at the ceiling. She had every appearance of a corpse, and after she had been restored by friction with eau-de-Cologne she sobbed hysterically.

After the marriage Kuder allowed them to go and live in Haafa's house, for he could hardly accommodate another married couple. To make things easier for Haafa, who was obliged to support them, I engaged Mostafa as cook. Haafa was not quite happy, it meant he was no longer king in his own domain; but the kitchen took on a new aspect.

Tiles and china shone (as did also the horse and bridle!). Our meals were served with military precision. Whenever he said "good morning" or asked for orders, Mostafa clicked his heels and saluted.

The situation did not last long, for Mostafa soon had one of his murderous fits. Haafa was called home one day by Lazhari, who for once had lost his grin. Mostafa was trying to kill Fatima because she had put a FEMALE child into the world. He vowed that no *girl* should insult him by her existence. His mother-in-law, who tried to protect the baby, got hit on the head. Haafa arrived in time to avert a tragedy. He was broad and solid, Mostafa was tall and thin; Haafa won by sheer weight. But after Mostafa was thrown out of Haafa's house the situation in our kitchen became rather strained and I had to let Mostafa go.

During this time things were happening in Kuder's house. It was rumoured in the village that Red Beard was in financial difficulties. He had mortgaged his date garden to a Jew money-lender who was threatening to foreclose. Zora, whose visits to me had ceased, was reported to be starving. By way of liquidating the family burden he married off "grand-mother" to the guardian of the Mosque, a good man whom I knew quite well. Sfaya, his sister, was married to a young man from the neighbouring village of Bab-el-Darb. By great good fortune the two fell in love with one another, and when the first baby was born Sfaya sent for Margaret to show it to her. She was as pleased as a child with a new toy.

ARAB INTERLUDE

Margaret's description of Sfaya's maternal care was illuminating: Sfaya folded her woollen shawl in four and covered the infant's face to keep it warm. The next day we learned that Sfaya was tearing her hair in a frenzy because her baby was dead.

Whether intentionally or not, Kuder disposed of his wife by kicking her in the stomach when she was far advanced with child. When I sent Saulea to fetch Zora, Kuder forbade Saulea the house. I then got Ali the Mason to intervene with his kinsman. Ali brought back word that Zora was eight years old and might no longer go out. There was nothing more I could do. Obviously Kuder was hoping I would bribe him to send me Zora, but I was not prepared to do this. Occasionally I met Hamid on the road and asked for news, but Hamid was very shy and all he ever answered was "*Zora m'le*" (Zora is well). In time others claimed my friendship and my interest; Zora became a faint memory.

Years later, when I had almost forgotten her, I heard she was to be married. The bridegroom was a young man whose father owned a well-irrigated stretch of land on the fringe of the oasis where vegetables are grown for market. The youth passed my gate daily, enthroned on his mule laden with panniers of vegetables. I was overjoyed that Zora should make such a satisfactory marriage. It appeared that Red Beard had tried a year earlier to sell her to a rich old man who had set aside the mother of his grown-up children, but Nejma had asserted her feeble will and her brother the schoolmaster had negotiated this marriage with the son of a friend.

FEUD

My feud with Red Beard made it impossible for me to share in the festivities of the Slimane house. I waited for the bride at midnight in the house of the bridegroom. Her arrival was heralded by the customary volley of gunfire. We sprang to our feet and seizing in each hand bunches of lighted candles ranged ourselves on either side of the bridal chamber doorway. The usual bundle of red damask was carried in on the back of Saulea and deposited on the bridal bed.

Poor little Zora! I prayed the husband might be kind. I longed to see the girl I had loved as a child, but I could not bear to see her under wedding circumstances. I preferred to wait for the traditional reception five days later.

That day the crowd almost equalled the wedding crowd. I made my way over the encumbered floor to where Zora was squatting on a rush mat. She held a large red silk handkerchief to her face. This was customary on the wedding night, but five days later it was not usual to be overwhelmed by shyness. Someone nudged her and said "*Ingles.*" The hand dropped, and the little familiar face—so pale and still so childlike—blinked at me through half-closed eyes that I remembered so big, so smiling.

"Zora!" My tone was a mixture of surprise and dismay.

She pulled me to her, frail arms clasped my neck, she pressed her cheek hard against mine: "Maama!"

The child was still a child, she had scarcely grown.

"But Zora——"

ARAB INTERLUDE

And foolishly we found we were both crying, but smiling too.

"It is nothing," she explained. "It is the light—but I shall get used to it in time."

The tears were pouring down her cheeks.

"Light! You call this light?"

"It is the light after the dark . . . the dark room in my *halouf* uncle's house."

"But you haven't always been in that room?"

She nodded, smiling.

Still I protested: "But Zora . . . not *all* the time, not . . . not *ever since* . . .?"

I was suddenly overwhelmed by self-reproach, by a sense of neglect and responsibility.

"Six years! Six years in a dark room. . . ."

She dabbed her eyes.

"I shall get used to the light; already I'm much better." And then confidentially: "My husband is so kind, he lets me walk in the garden at night. . . ."

CHAPTER XXIII

Mahami's Marriage

SLIMANE TAYEB, the brother of Ali the Mason, replaced Mostafa as cook. The fact of her father having employment bettered Mahami's position in the house of Slimane. Her father could afford to feed her and she was no longer abjectly dependent upon Ali. It was very soon evident that Hafiza treated her a little less as a poor relation. She continued to look after the children, but she did it with the self-respecting cheerfulness of a niece instead of a depressing drudge.

Tayeb was quite an asset in our household, he had been well trained in the house of Count Landon; he cooked well, served it well, and understood European ways. The Slimane brothers were pleased that he was working for me, it relieved them of an economic incubus. Haafa was the only dissatisfied person. He disliked having a relation to boss the kitchen. But Haafa had the quality of a rock in the sea. He assumed a stolid permanence, with the conviction that the others who came would surely go.

I had only engaged Tayeb for the sake of Mahami, and Mahami's future was our immediate concern. She was nearly seventeen and it was obvious that a husband must be found for her.

I talked to Tayeb about it and he answered that

ARAB INTERLUDE

the will of Allah would be done. I promised Mahami, and Margaret too promised, that she should have a *nice* husband, in other words we would not consent to her being fobbed off on to some rich old man.

The husband had to be a Slimane, and we learned that the Sheikh-el-Arab's cook was a member of the great clan and had a son. When I learned that Mahami was going to be married to the Sheikh-el-Arab's cook's son I was satisfied. Boasid was a handsome young man who held himself proudly as he rode into town on his white mule.

When Mahami asked me what her prospective husband was like I described him in glowing terms; long before the wedding night she was madly in love. It was a really suitable and desirable marriage, the charity child was in luck at last. The position of cook to the big Chief implied great trust and was highly remunerated. For obvious reasons the Sheikh-el-Arab, like the Sultans of Turkey, never eats any other food except that which his own cook prepares for him. This particular branch of the Slimanes at all events would never know want.

The marriage took place at the new moon. Mahami made hardly any pretence of regret at leaving home. She was madly excited at marrying a handsome young husband who would shower her with good things and raise her to an equality with her uncle's wives who had hitherto despised her.

I did not wait to see the bride after the traditional gun-shot, but asked Saulea to bring me news.

One was always curious to know whether a girl was satisfied or not with the man who had been selected

MAHAMI'S MARRIAGE

for her and vice versa. I expected Saulea to bring good news of Mahami, instead of which she shook her head and muttered spiteful remarks about Mahami's father and her uncles.

On my way to Mahami's on the fifth day I met Boasid.

He looked curiously unself-conscious, I thought, for a bridegroom.

"I am going to see your wife," I said.

"My wife?" he repeated. "I am not married."

"Isn't Mahami your wife?"

"My brother's wife."

"I didn't know you had a brother."

"Smail . . . is my senior."

No one had mentioned to me the name of Smail.

I looked for Mahami among the chattering women, but she was not there. Someone pointed to the bedroom. I went in and found her lying dishevelled in a dark corner; she would not move to greet her friends, and when I tried to get her to answer me she was incoherent.

In the street I found Saulea: "Come to the house this evening," I said, "and tell me about Mahami . . ."

At that moment a scraggy, swivel-eyed creature came up to me with extended hand. I shrank back from the beggar.

"Tell him, Saulea, I have no money."

Saulea pulled the calico across her mouth: "That is Mahami's husband, he wants to shake hands with you."

"But he's horrible . . . he's horrible, Saulea!"

ARAB INTERLUDE

"He's the firstborn of his mother," Saulea answered, as if it were explanation enough.

When I got home I unburdened my indignation on Tayeb, who was quite unmoved:

"A wife was required for Smail. It is difficult to refuse a relation."

At the end of six months Mahami was brought back to the house of her father and uncles in a dying condition. To prove the family's civilised standard of life the French doctor was summoned. He sat by her as she lay on the floor in a small dark room and asked her questions, to which the only answers he received were groans. He was not allowed to examine her or feel her pulse. He expressed certain theories and departed in utter perplexity. The uncles shrugged their shoulders and Ali said: "She will surely die, only Allah knows what is wrong with her."

Margaret went to see Mahami. She found her under a pile of rugs and shawls, her face turned to the wall. At the sound of Margaret's voice she looked up with glazed eyes. Her voice was hardly audible. Margaret dropped on to her knees, their heads were close together. Then Mahami confessed she would not have a child by such a husband and had brewed the herbs that induced abortion. No one knew—not her father or her mother, not even Hafiza. Her father said she must be sent back. If she did not go back there would be a divorce, and divorce was a family scandal. Her fate was in the hands of her uncles, but Hussein and Salah were absent at

MAHAMI'S MARRIAGE

Philippeville. She dreaded their return, fearing their verdict.

Margaret promised she would do all in her power to prevent her being sent back to Smail. We conferred with Hafiza, who had power over Ali. Hafiza promised that she would protect Mahami.

Every day Saulea brought news of the sick girl and of how Smail came and beat on the outer door claiming the return of his wife.

So long as Mahami remained under her father's roof a state of feud was maintained between the two Slimane houses. Mahami's mother-in-law was already clamouring for a divorce

The merchants were called back from Philippeville for a family council, and because Tayeb was earning a good wage he dared to raise his voice: he was for sacrificing his daughter to end the scandal. Ali, goaded by his wife, alone protested. Ali was an important factor, he had built the family's house and soon would be called upon to enlarge it. Behind Ali was the full weight of Hafiza's important family.

Saulea, squatting in the shade of an olive tree while we drank our morning coffee, related these details.

"What of the merchant brothers, Hussein and Salah?" I asked. "What do they say?"

Saulea hesitated, emitted a little grunt and looked round to make sure that old Tayeb was out of hearing.

"Perhaps," she said guardedly, "they have something on their conscience."

"You mean they married her to Smail instead of to Boasid?"

ARAB INTERLUDE

"More than that. . . ."

"Tell me, Saulea," I urged, "tell me what Hussein and Salah may have upon their consciences that can affect Mahami's future?"

Saulea drew her thin shawl around her as if she were suddenly cold and prefaced her story with a little hard cough that I knew so well. It meant that she had something of importance to relate. Then she began in a low voice a story which seemed at first to have no connection with Mahami or the uncles.

It appeared that in the past Mahami had an elder sister. Her name was Leika; she was beautiful, full of fun and laughter and joy of life. She loved the open air and spent her time on the roof in preference to the courtyard.

Their neighbour in the adjoining house asked that Leika might be given in marriage to his son. Tayeb refused: Leika could not be given in marriage outside the family. Leika began to lose her spirits and her looks. . . .

A few months later her mother came into her room when she was undressed and saw what the ample Arab garments had so cunningly concealed. Leika was shortly going to have a child.

Instead of standing by her daughter protectively as feminine solidarity required, she immediately told her husband. The girl, hard pressed, confessed that her lover was the son of the neighbour. He had come over the roof at night. They were in love. She begged to be allowed to marry him. The merchant brothers were recalled from Philippeville; they

MAHAMI'S MARRIAGE

agreed that the family's honour was at stake. The marriage of Leika to the neighbour's son could in no way remove the tarnish. Scandal tongues must be silenced. Not a man, not a woman in the oasis, would dare to breathe the name of Leika once she had paid the penalty. It would be then as though nothing had ever happened, as though Leika in fact had never lived.

They deputed Tayeb to put the poison in her food. Leika's mother sat at the foot of her bed and watched her die. It took some hours. At intervals her father looked in to see how she was getting on and reported to his brothers.

An hour after her death she was buried.

"I can show you the mound in the cemetery." Saulea said conclusively.

In the evening I sent for Tayeb and told him that as he persisted in his intention of sending Mahami back to Smail I could no longer bear to look upon his face.

He accepted his dismissal with fatalistic indifference. Reduced to penury his voice was of no more account in the family councils, he dropped back into his former insignificant place. Mahami was once more dependent upon Ali, who decided that she should remain under his protection.

Divorce ensued.

CHAPTER XXIV

A Biskra Summer

WE decided to spend the summer at Biskra.

Three return tickets to England from Africa are expensive. We had been to England the summer before and the family had been unsympathetic about what they called my "mud house in the Sahara."

Every penny earned, saved and scraped had been spent on building and more was required.

The house was not finished. We seemed obliged to add unendingly. We needed a dining-room and a spare room, a studio, a garage and a stable.

Every time I planned an addition I said to myself, "this is the last!" Just as I had said "this is for ever" in every place where I had ever settled!

The decision to remain at Biskra was approved by the children. However young they were, I always discussed our plans or threw out a suggestion and waited for their reactions before deciding. It was part of my theory about bringing up, that children should be consulted. It develops judgment and a sense of responsibility. Dick wrote from Algiers that he envisaged with joy the summer at Biskra on condition that I left him a free hand with the motor.

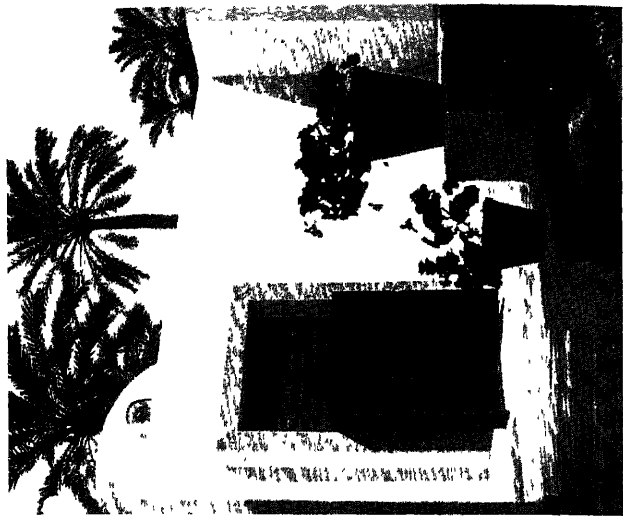
Margaret welcomed the idea because she had a black horse called Antar that she didn't want to leave to the care of lethargic Arabs during the heat.



Author at the entrance to the *goubi* where
Nuda Veritas was written



Margaret sitting on the old *jaience* stairway leading
from the courtyard to the roof of our house



Inner courtyard of the house, where we
danced on hot nights

A BISKRA SUMMER

Such heat! People warned us, but if we had ever listened to warnings we should have missed a lot that was interesting in our lives. It was natural that Europeans should complain of heat. Europeans in colonies were full of complaint. But when the Arabs said it would be unbearable I merely wrote them off as physical weaklings. I said, "I love heat, I have never found a place hot enough." They smiled and departed northward, leaving us to our oasis and our superiority complex.

June was bearable. We came in from the garden at ten and remained indoors until four. At dusk we motored to the barrage outside the town, a secluded spot surrounded by rocks where the river-bed was narrow. Here the *seguiá* formed a deep, cool, clear pool. We had it to ourselves, the idea of bathing had happily not occurred to anyone else. Later, in the great heat, we bathed in a state of nature under cover of the night.

In July we had to get up at five and come in at eight. Dick began to curse: The flies maddened him. Having repeatedly taken the motor to bits (technically called "taking down the engine") and put it together again until it withheld no more secrets, and as Antar was not in a condition to be ridden even if Margaret were willing to lend him—which she was not—Dick became a problem added to many.

The problem of Antar was the worst. He developed a skin disease from which no horse escaped that remained in the South during the summer. Although Margaret covered him in pomade that smelt of tar,

ARAB INTERLUDE

his hair dropped off and he developed horrible sores. The vet. recommended green grass, as if grazing were a summer amenity.

The next problem was our watch-dog: Binks belonged to the race known as Kabyle, similar in type to the Alaska sleigh-dog. The Arabs never tame them. Nomads have to defend themselves by throwing stones at their own dogs that surround the camp. Binkie was reputed in the village for his savagery. He did more towards keeping us safe at night than the watchman with his gun. We adored Binks and he was as gentle and devoted to us as an English lap-dog. At first this surprised the Arabs, but after a while Haafa and the rest of the household also made friends with him. It was a novel experience for an Arab to be friends with a dog, but when Binks escaped on to the road at night not a passer-by went unscathed. The next morning they would arrive with their complaints, their wounds, and their torn shirts. When Binks meant to bite he didn't bark, he just came up silently and did the job. In the garden he liked to bark without stopping for breath, generally as near my window as possible, until frenziedly I shouted for El Hadj to silence him. Hadj maintained that a watch-dog was meant to bark. I maintained that night was for sleep. During eight years I endured broken nights. The faintest sound brought me from my bed to challenge an imaginary marauder. Hadj could sleep while Binks at his side howled at a shadow.

When we got back from England the year before and I saw the poor wasted hairless thing that Binkie

A BISKRA SUMMER

had become I was furious with Haafa for having neglected him. Haafa swore it was the heat and I did not believe him. After I had spent a summer in Biskra I knew that Haafa had spoken the truth.

Margaret tended Binkie as heroically as she tended Antar. She faced the most revolting "dressings" and pomadings unflinchingly. Eczema had attacked Binks's ears, he flapped them about until they bled. After a while his head had to be bandaged to keep the flies off. At the end of weeks of futile doctoring, when there was no improvement and the heat made the bandaging of his head an agony, the vet. decided to cut off the diseased ear-tips. The operation had to be performed again and again. At the end of the summer Binkie had become a dog without ears.

By the beginning of July everyone had left Biskra except the French Commandant, whose leave was not due until August. We had ignored the few Europeans in Biskra, but suddenly we found ourselves very glad of the company of the French Commandant, and he seemed thankful for us. He would fetch us in the evening and motor us out to the foothills where we picnicked.

On the eve of his departure he took us to dine with the Caïd of Droha, an oasis near the mountains to the north-east. The Governor-General could not have been received more ceremoniously. A banquet had been prepared and was served in the village street. Myriads of insects flew around the incandescent lamps; one was vaguely aware that beyond the range of light the villagers were assembled to watch us. Dish after

ARAB INTERLUDE

dish was served of hard chicken and desert mutton, swimming in scarlet sauce flavoured with red peppers. The sky was low and laden with cloud. We seemed to be in a boiling cauldron with the lid on. Lightning forced us to cut short the Caïd's hospitality and hurry back to Biskra, but although no rain fell upon us it fell in the mountains. By the time we reached the *oued* it was transformed into a swirling torrent.

The Commandant, who had reserved his cabin on the Algiers-Marseilles boat, had no mind to miss it. He did not think he could endure forty-eight hours more of Biskra. There were long discussions as to whether we should risk the car in an attempt to get across. The Sheikh of the little oasis of Laha by the ford advised us not to try. He was not only Sheikh, but head of the family who owned the oasis. They were poor people whose meagre existence depended on selling home-made daggers to tourists in the streets of Biskra. One by one they came, until we were surrounded by a crowd all interested to know what the Commandant would decide. On the emphatic advice of the Sheikh we did nothing, but lay down to sleep in the open on mattresses with clean sheets and with soft pillows under our heads. These Arabs from the poorest of oases brought us the bedding they reserved for their guests, and it was clean.

Margaret was rather disappointed; she said, "I don't call this roughing it."

In the morning the Sheikh sent us hot coffee.

After breakfast the Commandant said good-bye. He meant to catch his boat, but he advised us to wait until the waters had subsided. Having accepted the

A BISKRA SUMMER

Sheikh's loan of a mule he plunged into the stream. Lalia assembled on the brink. Every moment we expected to see him swept away. The animal floundered, got into a hole, scrambled out, stumbled over boulders, was forced sideways and down the current; but when he reached the other side in safety a cheer went up from Lalia! The floods did not last long, and an hour after we crossed easily.

After the departure of the Commandant, Biskra was dead. The closed hotels and shops looked like monuments of the past. Old men and children lay about the streets sleeping. One was never quite sure if the white bundles were corpses or not. We found one in the *oued* staring up at the sky. An unpleasant sight; the sun had melted his brain.

On the road leading to the military headquarters two Arabs with the hard faces of Southern Nomads were leading a camel with a burden that might have been a mummy. It was tightly wrapped and tied around with rope. It rocked stiffly to and fro with the cadence of the camel's step. The Nomads talked as we walked along in the same direction. The corpse was that of their cousin who had wanted to marry a divorced woman. The husband of the woman had murdered him out of jealousy. His relations found him head downwards in a well. They were on their way to the military *bureau* to report.

"Will they ever find the murderer?" I asked.

"He is with us." They pointed to a morose man who led the camels.

In August we got up as soon as it was light, plunged

ARAB INTERLUDE

into a tepid bath that was meant to be cold, flung on a single garment, shuffled into sandals, and went out into the garden before the sun was up. One had learnt to dread the glow in the east that burst all too soon into a fiery ball. Dick would shake his fist at it and say, "You brute, you brute, I hate you so!"

In a letter to my mother I describe one of our August days:

. "Having been out in the garden since 5, we come in at 8 and drink gallons of orange and lemonade mixed with vermouth. This morning I tried to calculate with a pencil and paper how much money I've got left in the Bank (in case there's enough to go away). I had to deduct from my account the price of 110 sacks of *chaux hydraulique* and 30 sacks of cement, and two men who have been bringing pebbles from the river-bed at 8 frs. a metre and who claim to have brought 6 metres. The gardener has hired 4 hours of water at 3 frs. 50 an hour—how much does that come to and what have I left?

"I made a *calcul*. Margaret made a *calcul*. They came out differently. Then I made another *calcul* and it turned out neither like Margaret's nor like my first one. Then Dick, who was lying naked on the sofa reading the *Geographical Magazine*, got up looking just like Holman Hunt's picture of 'Love locked out,' and proceeded also to a *calcul* that turned out different to both mine and Margaret's. We then roared with laughter and

A BISKRA SUMMER

flung pencils and paper on the ground, and Dick let loose the parrot. . . .”

The days seemed endless. One could not concentrate sufficiently to read a book, writing was an effort, and the sweat dripped on to the paper. One sat on the tiled floor with one's back against the plaster wall (carpets and cushions were unendurable). Margaret and I sewed a little. Then came lunch, for which one had no appetite. After lunch we lay down to *sieste*. From this nightmare sleep one awakened exhausted, on a damp bed, one's head on a sopping pillow. A bath that was meant to be cold restored one a little to life.

At five o'clock we went into the drooping garden, sank limply into garden chairs, and gulped iced lemonade. Nasser watered the sand paths, which threw up steam. We sat far into the night on the terrace by the *oued* praying for a breeze.

Sometimes it came from the south and that was worse. It burnt our eyeballs like a blast from a furnace.

The nights were so noisy with bull-frogs and cicadas that one had to shout to be heard.

Impossible to sleep out of doors on account of the sand-flies that got through the smallest net and bit like mosquitoes.

The only way to get Dick to sleep was to spray him with eau-de-Cologne and fan him. During those few cooling minutes he fell asleep and tossed restlessly for a few hours.

Haafa assured us (it was now September) that the

ARAB INTERLUDE

rains would soon fall. Heavy clouds hung overhead crushing the heat down on us. Lightning lit up the night. Every morning Haafa said, "The rain will fall to-day"; and Nasser, paler, frailer, more than ever like Akhnaton, would stare up at the sky and announce confidently, "To-day." But the days went by and rain did not fall.

Dick said things in Arabic that he had learnt from the stevedores in the port of Algiers. Haafa threatened to hit Lazhari if he repeated Dick's language. Nasser threatened to leave if Dick ever again spoke insultingly about the Arabs, their mothers, and their antecedents. I tried to pacify Nasser by saying that Dick did not understand what he was saying, but Lazhari, with mischief in his eyes, insisted that Dick understood every word. The tension in the air was frightful. Then one night Dick burst into tears. He said he could not bear it another day, not another night. He said, "Let's go. . . ."

I was too limp to evolve a plan, but the next day Dick put some petrol in the car and I hardly remember how it happened, we flung anything that came to hand into suit-cases and at midnight started northward.

The road to Constantine was almost blocked with caravans. The Nomads had gathered in the harvest up in the Tell and were trekking south once more. Summer was over.

CHAPTER XXV

Constantine

IN five hours—because of the caravans that blocked the road—we reached the town of Constantine. It stands impressively on its mountain-top surrounded by deep ravines. Constantine gives the impression of an impregnable castle with drawbridges. It was one of the last places to be conquered by the French and only at tremendous sacrifice of life. But the fight was a fair fight, and as there was no poison gas and no bombing from the air there is no ill-feeling as between conqueror and conquered.

How cool seemed to us those streets! The children said it was heaven. We drove to an hotel, and while Margaret and I settled in, Dick went out to walk about the town. He was like a plant that revives in water. The fresh mountain air seemed to affect him almost immediately. He discovered Biskra friends in all the open-air cafés, and they all stood him iced beer. He returned to the hotel in a state of uproarious hilarity.

That night and for several nights we took our picnic basket to a hill-top where there was a lake surrounded by a wild wood. A lake . . . trees . . . these in themselves were Paradise. After the monotony of palms, leafy trees were unimaginably good to

ARAB INTERLUDE

the eye. At night the children slept wrapped in burnouses, their heads on a tuft of grass or on a log.

I can still recall the ecstasy of those fresh nights after the hellish suffocation of the desert.

We regained strength slowly, like people who have to learn to walk after an illness.

The Ben Ganas had friends in Constantine. They introduced us to the family of Ben Shériff. The Arabs of the coast being more civilised and therefore less traditional than the Arabs of the desert, Hamdani—the eldest son of Ben Shériff—dressed like a Turk, or rather as the Turks used to dress when I was in Turkey: European clothes and fez. The Ben Shériff ladies, although they never saw men, were able to go for motor drives and visit their friends. Hamdani confided to me that a Ben Gana had asked for his sister in marriage. This of course was contrary to Ben Gana traditions. The reason was perhaps because a doctor in Paris had told him he could never have children. The word had been whispered round the Ben Gana family with the result that none of his cousins would consent to marry him. Hamdani prudently asked how often his sister would be allowed to visit her family. The Ben Gana replied “on the occasion of a family funeral.” The engagement, needless to say, never took place.

Shériff was a Turkish name or title. The family had been local governors under the Sultans, and Hamdani took me to see the house in the country that had belonged to his family before the French conquest and that his father had sold to a Maltese millionaire.

CONSTANTINE

It was the most perfect specimen of Turkish art, I felt myself transported to Stamboul. The Maltese knew nothing of its value, he had acquired the property because of its farm lands. He did not require the house and used it as a shelter for his goats and sheep. Every room had a floor of old Turkish *faience* tiles. They formed a dado round the walls. The dados were, needless to say, falling down, and smashing as they fell.

A big inner courtyard was entirely paved in *faience* and had a central fountain and basin of most rare small tiles that gleamed in the sunlight like enamel. It was surrounded by a colonnade of white marble columns with carved capitals. These had been brought from Constantinople by the Shériff who was Turkish governor of the province.

The Maltese millionaire followed us round. He suffered from a superiority complex, either on account of his fortune or his British nationality, certainly not on account of his culture. His attitude towards Hamdani was patronising, he smiled scornfully at my enthusiasm. He said, pointing to the marble columns: "You can have them if you care to take them away."

Removing them would have entailed the collapse of the arcade and the house would immediately have been half a ruin.

Algeria is a nomadic country and, unlike its neighbours Morocco and Tunisia, is singularly poor in monuments of the past. Roman ruins abound, but since the collapse of Byzantium there is hardly anything to record the intervening centuries.

That a vandal with money should have the power

ARAB INTERLUDE

to turn this pearl of a palace into a stable for his goats filled me with anger. The goats were penned behind carved cedar-wood doors. Sheep browsed upon the grass that was shooting up between the cracked tiles of the courtyard. Broken, gleaming fragments were kicked aside into heaps.

I was overwhelmed at the senseless ruin before my eyes.

Faïence tiles of the Turkish period are becoming increasingly rare. Antiquaries and architects are willing to buy them at any price if they can only be found.

Hamdani promised he would try and get the owner to give me the tiles, or as many as I wanted, since he cared so little for them, but my appraisalment had made an impression. The Maltese sought a corroboration of my opinion, with the result that he sent me word through Hamdani that I could have the tiles, the doors, the shutters, and the columns for 100,000 francs . . . !

Hamdani was president of a club of young men, sons of well-to-do families, all of whom had taken their degrees at the Lycée of Constantine. They were barristers, doctors, journalists, stenographers, merchants—and exactly what the club stood for I never quite made out. They were all avowed Nationalists and Moslems.

We were adopted by the club, who in their spare time did all they could to entertain us. We were generally to be found in the woods around the lake, and after work-hours they would come up there and join us. I discouraged them as soon as they began

CONSTANTINE

to bring their girls with them. It is better not to try to describe the sort of girl in Constantine who allowed herself to be picked up by young Arabs in European clothes.

One night, after Dick and Margaret had gone to sleep with a log for a pillow, Hamdani offered to take me in his car to see the Roman aqueduct by moonlight. He swore it was quite near and that we would not be away long.

As a matter of fact it was very far, or else we lost our way, and having at last found the aqueduct in a very remote lonely place his car ran out of petrol.

We waited—there was no alternative—hoping every minute for help. At dawn, by which time I was in a state of considerable agitation, two Algerian sportsmen in an open car with their guns and their dogs stopped at my request. They were gruff farmers and had few words and no manners, but the earnestness of my appeal impressed them. Having given Hamdani the “once over” they gestured me to get into their car and left him standing disconsolately by his own. As we sped towards Constantine the two men discussed me in colloquial French, just as if I wasn’t there.

“What else could we do? It’s a *sacré* bore, we shall be too late for our birds, but one couldn’t abandon her to that *indigène*.”

After a while I said: “Would you mind if we didn’t go to Constantine?”

They were surprised.

“Aren’t you from Constantine?”

“Well—eh—would you mind taking me up to the lake?”

ARAB INTERLUDE

"To the lake, Madame . . . there is no house by the lake."

"My children," I explained, "are asleep in the wood."

The driver slowed up, looked hard at my clothes, my hands, my ruby ring; it was evident I was no tramp.

"Do your children habitually sleep in the wood, Madame?"

"Yes, they like sleeping in the wood . . . we like it better than the hotel."

The driver looked back at his companion. I surmised that by silent consent they agreed I was mad.

The car was still being driven very slowly and I was in a great hurry.

"I am so afraid they will wake before I get there and find themselves alone. Would you mind if we went a little faster?"

This they obligingly did and were silent for a while, as if conversation and speed were incompatible. Then suddenly the one who was sitting at the back with the dogs and the guns asked:

"Madame, excuse me, but are you French or do I detect an accent?"

"You detect an English accent, Monsieur."

"Ah . . .!"

And the driver likewise emitted a long-drawn "Ah," and they nodded their heads as if they had the whole explanation: Not mad but English, or perhaps the two were synonymous. Then came the all-important—for them—question of how I came to be stranded on a lonely road at dawn with a native Arab.

CONSTANTINE

I explained: "He's a friend, and we ran out of petrol."

"A FRIEND. You know the individual's name, Madame?"

"Yes, yes, he's Hamdani Ben Shériff."

They repeated after me: "Ben Shériff!—so that's Ben Shériff!"—and one to the other: "Ah, that's it—that's Ben Shériff!"

And I thought I detected in their voices a shade of resentment for having missed their morning's shoot. It hadn't after all been necessary, the woman wasn't in danger. . . . At the entrance to the wood I asked them to drop me and thanked them. I arrived just as Dick was stretching and Margaret was rubbing her eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI

Aïssa's Farm

ONE morning we decided to pay a surprise visit to Aïssa Ben Gana at his farm.

It was about fifty kilometres from Constantine, in a wild region far from any main road. We followed a primitive track that serpentined among the hills and that was only passable because it was summer. We arrived in time for lunch. Aïssa was lying on a rainbow-coloured carpet in his loggia exactly as at Biskra, but instead of black and gold he was dressed in the most immaculate white wool burnous. He greeted us as though he expected us. He said: "You will stay the night." He sent for our luggage and kept us three weeks.

It was not Aïssa's fault that he had only one spare room. He and "Alfonso," who shared the farm, were in the throes of building. Aïssa was throwing out a wing, but "Alfonso" was building a house. One sensed that he contemplated marriage.

Margaret and I each had a bed in a long high room, and Dick had a mattress on the floor. There were a few pegs to hang our clothes on, and the rest we kept higgledy-piggledy in our suit-cases. Dick waked up early and went out, so that he was not really in the way. Our hosts did their best for us. The legend of the English and their baths had

AISSA'S FARM

penetrated even to this remote Arab home, and an English-shaped Victorian hip-bath was installed on the balcony (not overlooked) and filled each morning with boiling water.

There was, moreover, a hot-water spring in the vicinity, and the big hot swimming-pool had been built around and roofed in for privacy. We seemed to have it all to ourselves. It had evidently been exploited by the Romans. The water was supposed to have special medicinal values. Whatever these were, we always came out of it in a state of utter exhaustion.

The weather might have seemed hot to anyone else, but we found it deliciously cool. Oued Atmenia was in a wide undulating country, broken by occasional rocky cliffs and green woodlets. Corn seemed to grow as far as the eye could see. Dates in the South and corn in the North were the basis of Ben Gana fortunes. Aïssa paid his retainers, stewards, etc., in corn.

The house stood among high shady trees. A clear spring bubbled out of a rock into a hollow where the animals of the farm came to drink. There were sheep and goats, cows and horses, donkeys and mules, geese, ducks, and turkeys, and all these barnyard noises were intermixed with the distant sound of threshing.

At the back of the house among vegetables and fig trees, under a pergola of vines, we drank our morning coffee. It was a quiet corner and I spent most of my mornings there.

An old turbaned gardener, discovering that I liked figs, gathered handfuls of them—green and purple—and laid them next to me on the ground. Aïssa

ARAB INTERLUDE

generally reclined limply in a rickety wicker chair, and "Alfonso" would fling his burnous on the ground and lie on it in an attitude of exhaustion as though he hadn't just got up.

The fact was that Oued Atmenia was in a fever region. The vivid green of the trees beyond the garden testified as to the swamp. Both Aïssa and "Alfonso" were prone to fever and had bouts of it at Biskra. But they were almost prostrate with it at Oued Atmenia. There were days when "Alfonso" never appeared at all, or dragged himself about looking like death.

On his good days Aïssa exerted himself to take an interest in threshing. As the old feudal-minded peasants came up to kiss him on the shoulder he waved them away, indicating that he did not require their homage. His attitude was neither autocratic nor democratic. He was authoritative yet courteous. If he were displeased he adopted a sudden cold reserve. He never shouted when he was angry, he was very calm.

He had served in France during the War and had amusing tales to tell of Spahis' fraternisation with Russians. They sang songs together round the camp-fire and danced. The Arabs liked the Russian songs and the Russians liked the Arab songs. The French Commandant would come to Aïssa in great alarm and say the "noise" *must* be stopped, it would attract enemy fire. But no one ever succeeded in suppressing the night concerts which, so far from attracting enemy fire, provoked applause from the German trench.

The great game both for Aïssa and his servants was

AISSA'S FARM

to bait Dick. This was easily done by planning a partridge drive, supplying him with a gun, and then at the last moment discovering that the key of the ammunition-room had been mislaid.

This would put Dick into a fury. He aired all his Arab curses that so shocked Haafa, but which delighted Aïssa. Another joke was to tell him that the stallion he rode was a mare in foal and so he must ride her gently.

"How do you know she's a mare?" Dick asked.

"By the shape of her ears."

He studied the ears of all the horses on the farm. He reviewed them one by one, and argued with the French overseer who had not been initiated into the joke, and who insisted that Dick was riding a stallion.

Dick got quite impatient: "But no. . . . She's a mare. Look at her ears!"

The Frenchman looked puzzled. He kept shaking his head and repeating: "Ears . . . ears? *Mais non, mon petit!*"

To the Arabs it was unbelievable that at thirteen a boy should be ignorant of those things that an Arab knows from the time he can walk and talk. They thought it was rather wrong and blamed me. He was so strong and manly for his age, so overgrown; he would be a man in spite of me, they said.

"He'll get into lots of scrapes and give you lots of anxiety," They predicted this with a kind of smug satisfaction.

One day when Dick was riding his "mare" over the hills he was attacked by a horse at large. I never understood what happened, but Dick—who knows no

ARAB INTERLUDE

fear—was afraid for once. He managed to dismount and walked the many miles home. There was nothing to be done, he said, but leave them to it.

The Sheikh-el-Arab's farm was a couple of kilometres away, but he was in Paris, only his wives and daughters were there, shut up in their inner courtyard. Ali, a cousin, and the Bash Agha Abdul Aziz of El-Oued, another cousin, completed the family circle. We walked or rode to one or the other.

Ali's house was a French *château* with fine entrance-gates flanked by carved stone lions. He had acquired it through marriage with a very beautiful heiress, who was of course incarcerated within the house and never allowed to view her own property. Ali was one of the young good-looking Ben Ganas and one of the richest. He was also the most fanatical. He married at seventeen his cousin, who was an only child, whom her father adored. She was not shut up until she was fifteen, which was most unusual, and as a result the men of the family still talked about her and her beauty, and that too was unusual. She had been to school and was the only woman in the family who could read and write or speak French. By his marriage Ali, who had already the large property of his father, became the owner of one of the finest properties in the Province of Constantine. He shut up his wife so jealously that she was never more seen. He would not even let her attend a family wedding.

On the occasion of a marriage in his house the Sheikh-el-Arab sent his wife in a curtained car to fetch

AÏSSA'S FARM

Ali's wife. Such a thing had never been heard of, it was a great honour conferred; but Ali adamantly refused to let her go, a discourtesy that the Sheikh-el-Arab would not easily forgive.

Out of loyalty, and with oriental resignation, Ali's wife never complained. She had a baby every year, and at the age of twenty-six had given birth to eight or nine, of which three only survived. She was quite lovely, with huge black eyes and little well-bred features and a skin like alabaster. She hardly ever smiled, was beautifully dressed, covered in jewels, and surrounded by slaves.

Ali, who outwardly had a magnificent physique, was in reality nothing better than a whited sepulchre. His inertia was typical. He had horses he never rode. He had a car which he only drove if his negro sat next to him to help him turn the wheel at the bends. His servants were as listless as himself; his house was ill-kept. At Biskra he had a big garden in the heart of the town through which the *segua* passed; he left it a waste. . . .

I once told him I could not bear people who were lazy and purposeless.

He mocked at my Western point of view. "Laziness," he said, "is the desire to do nothing when there is something to be done. But as I have nothing to do I cannot be lazy."

I said: "Why don't you find something to do?"

"Why should I?"

"Because a man ought to have occupation."

"Why?"

"A man who does nothing has no right to existence."

ARAB INTERLUDE

"What is the object of existence?"

I evaded the question which has exercised greater minds than his or mine. I argued: "Work is essential for the prestige of man."

He said: "Work is for those who require to earn, but I have no need of money."

I was in my aggressive mood. "You batten on the poor," I said, knowing the habits of Sheikhs.

He smiled passively. "From earliest times humanity has been divided into two kinds: the minority who dominate, the majority who are exploited."

"Are you not ashamed?"

"Certainly not. I give thanks to Allah."

One day we were discussing a Frenchman who had sheep in partnership with a Caid. He had just bought himself a Moth in order to visit his camps more easily.

"Poor devil," said Ali. "He spends his life counting sheep."

I explained: "He is responsible to those Europeans who have lent him their money to invest."

Ali gave a grunt of derision. "The European mania for investing money—even in the desert."

"Well, you breed sheep, don't you?"

"I do."

"Don't you ever count them?"

"I send my steward to count them."

"Can you trust your steward?"

"I trust no one."

"Then why don't you go yourself?"

"Too much effort."

"Don't you mind being robbed?"

AÏSSA'S FARM

"I am not in partnership with anyone."

"You are hopeless, Ali!"

"From your point of view."

"I suppose you are happy."

"I don't believe in happiness."

"What do you live for?"

"Nothing. But as I can't help living I only want to be left in peace until I go to Paradise."

"You won't go to Paradise, you've done nobody any good."

"Why not? I've done nobody any harm."

At Atmenia he started to build a guest-wing, but it was too much effort to superintend and remained unfinished, a ruin among Roman ruins. Outside the gates the uneven ground was littered with fragments of columns and capitals, pieces of cornice and carved oddments that might have been human statuary.

Ali's steward had seen a man in a golden helmet who disappeared when spoken to. Several people claimed to have seen him, and he went by the name of the "*Casque d'Or*." No one had any idea of ghosts or recognised a Roman soldier.

My chief pastime and Margaret's was to unearth the foundations of a Roman villa about a kilometre from Aïssa's house. Every afternoon we set off with spades and brooms. There was always a labourer who volunteered, for the Arabs have an idea that gold is hidden in Roman foundations. They will hack untiringly with a pickaxe at the risk of smashing anything of value, with the hope of opening up a cellar and finding gold. Our volunteers grew fewer when it was learnt that they had to cart away earth from

ARAB INTERLUDE

mosaic floors, and that I allowed no pickaxing! We uncovered a whole villa foundation and swept the floors clean, but Aïssa made us cover it all up again before we left. He was afraid of getting into trouble with the French authorities, who ordain that no one shall excavate without a permit.

Every day I did my duty by visiting the ladies in the courtyard. Margaret dropped in at all hours to gossip and laugh with them. Dick was admitted *ad lib.*, but they bored him and he availed himself of the privilege but rarely. If during the day I went up to my room to fetch something I always found a crowd of women examining my clothes. The first time I caught them at it they were rather frightened, but seeing that I only laughed they laughed too, and kept at it. There were things they held up admiringly, but others that sent them into shrieks of mirth!

There was not a corner of that room they did not ransack. If Aïssa had known he would have been furious. There were quite a lot of things that Aïssa never knew.

CHAPTER XXVII

Flood

OUR return to Biskra coincided with the rains. We discovered where the water came from that passed our garden in a rushing flood. It began with a petulant mud-coloured stream near Constantine. A few kilometres further a chorus of little murky streams poured into a bigger stream. At El-Kantara, where the mountain opens a door on to the desert, the road was washed away. Half a dozen Biskra cars that were returning after the heat stood in a file, and their owners dejectedly contemplated the mess. On the left the rock rose into a sheer cliff. On the right there was a drop into the gorge. The road was being washed over the edge. By hugging the left of the road and crawling one might get by. The "Biskris" thought of their cars and were not inclined to take risks. I understand that one should take care of one's car in Europe, a car that has to make a presentable appearance in London or Paris; but I had always regarded my Renault as a machine for fording rivers, rushing sand-dunes, overcoming boulders. It creaked, it rattled, it groaned, but it got there; and on the flat it still beat the fastest car in Biskra. Anyway, Dick would never have allowed me to hesitate. Seeing us determined put heart into the others. We led the procession. There wasn't much left of the road by the time we'd got by. Most of it

ARAB INTERLUDE

was being churned on its rapid way across the plain to Biskra!

We crossed the bridge half-way and saw it coming. Never before had I seen the flood arrive, and I had always hoped to. It was a flood all right. In the narrow creek it boiled and surged and foamed, then in the wide bed it tore across the open. One could hear the rattle of the shingle carried along by the force of the current. Its pace was that of a galloping horse. We arrived at M'cid in time to announce its arrival. The villagers assembled at our gate, which was a vantage-point. Dusk was falling when we heard the distant roar like an express train tearing through a tunnel. It was the greatest flood that had been seen at Biskra for years. Children born that year would be able to say they were born the "year of the flood." It filled the whole kilometre-wide *oued*. It uprooted palm trees and carried them like matches. We could not speak, for our voices were drowned by the roar, but each of us wondered, as did Haafa and Nasser, how much of the garden would be carried away.

Everyone had warned me that I was a prey to the flood, that it was a crazy bit of land to buy and crazier still to build a house on. As we stood there looking out over the vast surging waters, lightning lit up the sky. The wind shrieked in the palm tops and an occasional dull thud as of a muffled explosion told of river banks and village walls collapsing.

After two days of torrential rains mud houses crumbled into heaps. Terrified people said, "This is the end," and "Thus it is predicted in the old Arab writings."

My house, too, was built of mud bricks; and

FLOOD

although the foundations were solid, the stones and cement were not more than a foot above ground.

The night of our arrival I could not sleep. I walked round the house in breeches and boots, and wherever a pool had accumulated I dug a channel in the sand so that it emptied into a flower-bed. At the back of the house where there was a roofless room in process of building I found a lake. The water which had no outlet (Ali, of course, had never thought of a drain) was above the stone coping. The *toubes* were sodden, the bricks turned to mud at the touch.

I waked El Hadj, the night-watchman. To wake him I had to shake him. His first instinct was to hit me on the head with both his fists. His mind did not register very rapidly, and for some seconds I was in danger. Then with many a grunt he helped me to dig a deep hole in the middle of the roofless room. We led the water away from the wall through channels into the hole. When one was filled we dug another. All night we dug channels round the house to drain away the water from the foundations. The next morning Ali the Mason came to see if the house was standing, and when I told him what I thought of him for not making a drain he pushed back his turban and scratched his head. Then Nasser came to see what was left of the garden. There were no land-slides, but there were pools that threatened to precipitate a land-slide. Meanwhile the English fantailed pigeons in the yard splashed about in a muddy pool, one wing up and one wing down, and went round in circles, ducking their heads. Ali and his workmen made it

ARAB INTERLUDE

a good excuse to stop work. Everyone laughed at the strange phenomenon of the English pigeons bathing. I had brought the pair from London. On the journey they laid two eggs which inevitably got broken. They were loosed in the yard while the kitchen was in process of building and they chose to build a nest in the chimney, and so another two eggs had to be sacrificed. After that the village carpenter made a dovecot for them with three compartments, and painted little flowers and butterflies all over the face of it. They were wired into this to give them a taste for it. They sulked for a few days, and then set to work and produced two more eggs.

Mother bird sat on them determinedly, while father coo'd and seemed a good deal pleased. Then Dick said it was time to remove the wire, because father was not likely to stray very far while mother was on the nest. After the storm, when he had finished bathing, he flew a long way off, probably to dry himself, and didn't come back until dark. That night the wild-cat that has long pointed ears and climbs palm trees caught him. We found a white wing on the ground in the morning.

Mrs. Pigeon thereupon abandoned her two eggs and wandered about disconsolately. There was great discussion among the household as to what would happen next: Would she console herself with an Arab mate? Haafa hoped that all the next generation of village pigeons would develop fan-shaped tails!

After our experience with the horse and the dog in the summer I felt discouraged, and never tried to keep pigeons again.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Lunatics at Large

AMONG the features of Biskra life (and very understandable to one who has experienced a Biskra summer) were the mad people. *Maboul*, the Arabs call them, and they are sacred. All mad people are beloved of God according to Arab belief, and as there are no asylums in Algeria the crazy people are dependent upon the population for their food, and they never starve. The brother of my negro neighbour lived among the palm trees that bordered the stream on the open road leading to the town. One met him in the village street, on the road, and in the town. He had a senile grin, a black beard, and long dishevelled hair. He was gaunt and covered only by a short shirt.

There were other madmen in the oasis. One was hardly decent; covered only by a sack, he had curly hair and walked fast, talking volubly, he looked like John the Baptist.

There was a boy of about fourteen. One only met him in the town. He threw stones and spat without any provocation. It was fascinating to watch how this mad, wild boy attacked a passer-by; but no matter what he did no one ever hit him.

One evening, returning from a walk, I found a pretty little Nomad girl in the garden. She was

ARAB INTERLUDE

standing by the wrought-iron well, braiding her hair and singing a song in a sweet soprano voice. I asked her what she wanted and she looked at me with big staring eyes and went on singing. She was very pretty, slim, and graceful, and quite mad.

I called Haafa and asked him to reason with this Ophelia to induce her to depart in peace the way she had come. Haafa contemplated her in awkward silence and called Nasser. The anaemic young gardener did not hesitate, he took her firmly round the waist. Ophelia laughed, and her gestures left one in no doubt of what she was accustomed to expect. If an Arab skin can turn pink, Nasser certainly blushed. He was furiously embarrassed. Ophelia broke away from his grasp and flitted round the garden provokingly. It was entertaining to watch, more like a ballet than reality.

Another day I saw a strange man sitting in the wheel-barrow watching Nasser at work. He did not stand up or greet me as I approached, which surprised me.

Haafa took me aside: "*Maboul*, the son of my neighbour. His father usually keeps him in chains; he's violent, I advise you not to approach him."

"But Haafa, I'd like him to go!"

Haafa did not know how to get him away, and Nasser worked nervously without ever turning his back.

I went up to the madman and with a disarming smile told him apologetically that my dog had got loose. No Arab requires any further explanation, dogs are not kept as pets in the Sahara. Even the madman

LUNATICS AT LARGE

understood. He got up quickly and disappeared like a flash down the steep path that led to the *oued*.

When the "South Sea Bubble" was being filmed, Ivor Novello and all the cast came and danced on our terrace by moonlight. When Ivor got into the car to return to his hotel he found himself up against something soft and warm.

He leapt out in horror and a human form was dragged forth. Ivor flashed out a revolver and pushed me back. There was a tense moment while he covered the object, and I wondered if he'd miss it.

The Arab turned out to be a half-wit who had found the car a comfortable shelter. He blinked at us owlishly and allowed himself to be pushed unresistingly outside the garden gate.

CHAPTER XXIX

Cousins of the King

A CAPTAIN of the Biskra garrison for a period was Napoleon, a little Corsican. He was very little indeed, and rode the largest horses. Occasionally I rode with him. One morning he arrived early, tied his horse up in the yard and joined us under the olive trees. He had come to describe in glowing terms an apparition that had bowled him over the night before at the casino.

"English, blonde, beautiful, wreathed in diamonds, throwing thousand-franc notes on the baccarat table as if they were flowers!"

Napoleon had never seen a woman to compare with her: She must be *SOMEONE*, he said, someone of note. She had an "air" about her—he *must* make her acquaintance.

"Didn't you speak to her?" I asked.

"I didn't—didn't dare, but I sat next to her and I followed her the whole evening."

"Did she notice you . . .?"

He thought she had smiled, but he wasn't sure. He meant to see her again. He would never rest until he had met her, spoken with her, found out her name.

The Ben Ganas, he said, were all buzzing about her, but he wasn't going to let one of them scrape acquaintance with her before he did.

COUSINS OF THE KING

I laughed. How often I had heard similar outpourings about newly arrived tourists.

Napoleon departed, promising to come back and tell us the sequel.

That afternoon the Sheikh-el-Arab arrived unannounced. This was unusual; habitually he sent a messenger to herald his visit.

He came in a hurry to tell us that cousins of the King of England had arrived in Biskra with a letter of introduction. They expressed a desire to meet me, and he asked permission to bring them to tea. The name—he hesitated—perhaps it was Mon'batten—and another name as well. In anticipation of the tea event and in consideration of my distance from the town he brought me a quantity of home-made honey-cakes. A little later he returned escorting Edwina Mountbatten and her sister-in-law Nada Milford Haven.

That night the Sheikh-el-Arab got a party together hastily in their honour. Margaret and I arrived in time to see Napoleon make his entry.

To meet the cousins of the King he was dolled up in his best, and trailed his scarlet Spahi burnous like a Roman toga. As soon as he caught sight of Edwina his eyes glowed. He forgot about the royal cousins. He forgot everything in his delight at meeting the lovely tourist he had raved about. The Sheikh-el-Arab, who never was any good at names, presented him simply to "*Madame la Cousine du Roi d'Angleterre.*"

Napoleon's face underwent a tragic transformation. Recalling his disrespect of the night before,

ARAB INTERLUDE

he looked as if he'd like the floor to open up and swallow him!

Edwina, appreciating the joke, smiled forgivingly. Napoleon nearly lost his head, he hopelessly lost his heart. Later he was destined to receive a postcard from Brook House, London. It lived in his inner breast pocket by day and under his pillow at night.

"Biskris" talk about the visit of Edwina Mountbatten and her sister-in-law to this day. She was lovely, she was gracious, she talked perfect French; but she also displayed a spirit of adventure. In order to reach Tunis she chartered a "caterpillar" and crossed the desert as the crow flies, undaunted by the fact that she was expecting a baby in three months. From Tunis they made their way to Morocco. Having miraculously escaped birth in the Sahara Desert and in the mountains of the Atlas, the infant came to light in Barcelona on the way back to Brook House. She displayed a fine example of courage and endurance, but Edwina is an example in more ways than one. If destiny had ordained her to battle through life she might have beaten Rosita Forbes and Ella Maillart at their own game.

The Arabs are no respecters of personalities, they have an absolutely detached judgment, and Edwina's glamour was in no way enhanced by her royal connection; rather did she confer glamour upon the Royal Family. The oasis of Biskra henceforth took a special interest in the "*Sultan Anglais*," who was visualised as surrounded by his family of houris wreathed in diamonds.

COUSINS OF THE KING

Abdellah, being the right-hand man of the Sheik-el-Arab, had the privilege of knowing whatever personality of note came to Biskra. He once described Isadora Duncan to me as "a fat woman of no interest." Anatole France was simply "a white-bearded old man who never spoke."

It was not very easy to make an impression on the Biskra world.

CHAPTER XXX

Horses

ONE did not require to be what the French call *fortunée* in order to own horses. They were inexpensive to buy, and an Arab horse is not very fastidious as to stable and keep.

At one moment we had, besides Margaret's much-loved Antar, a big white stallion that Dick bought when the Spahis held one of their periodical sales of unfit army horses. He selected one that was a magnificent creature to look at, but one soon discovered it had no staying power. Dick adored it because not only was it up to his weight, but it ambled effectively, throwing its head about and neighing loudly. The town heard him coming and no circus horse was more spectacular than that white, neighing stallion as it danced up the street.

Dick became as accomplished in neighing as the village idiot in klaxoning. As neither I nor Margaret would ride his horse, Haafa had to exercise it when Dick went back to Algiers. This situation was aggravated when a Spahis officer who was transferred to Morocco gave us his *pur sang Anglais*. He could not bear to sell it and he might not transport it. Whether it really was a thoroughbred was beyond me to judge, but in the oasis it was known as "the English horse." It was bay, had long legs, a long back, a long neck, and a long tail. It was in fact

HORSES

quite different in shape to an Arab horse, and so perhaps it was an English thoroughbred. At all events nobody could do anything with it. That is to say I could not, nor Margaret nor Haafa nor Nasser, and as Dick preferred his own the matter of exercising became acute. Margaret rode him once. He started to gallop long before they reached the desert, and as nothing would induce him to stop she deliberately rode him into a wall, with the result that they both fell. After that I sold him to a horse-meat butcher who swore by all the Prophets that he would be kind to him. On these occasions it is better not to think too hard and to curb one's imagination.

Personally I like the IDEA of riding. I learnt to ride when I was twelve and hunted in Ireland when I was sixteen. But in the Sahara horses did all they could to discourage me.

In the bottom of my heart I have always been terrified of a horse. Its independence of character appals me. I know I am not its master and it's no use pretending. The animal does what it will with me, or I feel it could, which comes to the same thing. English horses behave themselves, they have been trained; but Arab horses are devoid of discipline and full of caprice. They indulge in the unexpected. In the middle of a perfectly good full-out gallop my horse gave a great leap in the air that was half a buck. I didn't come off—but the rest of the ride I was waiting for the next buck, and although it didn't happen it ruined the promenade.

Aïssa Ben Gana would lend me his mare to exercise. I got used to her and she to me. Nomads would

ARAB INTERLUDE

stop me and ask if it was not the Agha's mare. Her action was smooth, and when she galloped one felt her muscles between one's knees. She seemed to fly rather than gallop. It was pure heaven to head her towards the horizon and feel the soft wind against one's face. She out-spiced all others, and in company always took the lead, but—there was the anxiety of riding a mare in a world of stallions. Out in the open desert it was all right, but in the oasis I never knew what was coming round the corner.

One day I came upon the French Commandant riding with his wife; the road was narrow. From afar he shouted. "If you are on the *jument* don't stop, pass by quickly. . . ."

We each put our animals into a fast trot and the Commandant spurred his stallion as we passed. But if riding a mare had its anxious moments, riding a stallion was an unceasing torment. Stallions fight each other.

Riding parties were anything but sociable affairs. When Diana and Duff Cooper came to Biskra with the Ednams,¹ our Ben Gana friends placed horses at their disposal and organised a picnic at Chetma. Ednam chose the Sheik-el-Arab's ceremonial stallion, although (or because) he was advised it was dangerous. He exchanged the Arab saddle for an English one and pronounced the animal one of the best he had ever ridden.

On our way through Biskra town, however, the party was held up on account of a crowd round the snake-charmer. Diana happened to be next to me

¹ Present Lord Dudley. Lady Ednam was killed with Lord Dufferin and Mrs. Loeffler, when their aeroplane crashed on its way to England from Le Touquet in 1930

HORSES

and suddenly our horses lashed out and set to! They plunged and reared and shrieked.

Attention was diverted from the snake-charmer. The Arab crowd and the Europeans in the café rushed forward, but no one would venture to separate us. People just stood and gaped. It must have been a fine sight, and I probably should have enjoyed it as they did! But the sensation of being on a rearing horse while the heels of another lash out towards you is, of all sensations, the most terrifying. The miracle that happened on this occasion was that Ednam dismounted and seized my horse's head. Horses seemed to hold no terror for him.

Later in the morning, Diana was in another fight with Ali's stallion, after which she was rather unnerved and refused to let anyone ride by her side. At the approach of Ali she shouted: "Don't come near me; my horse doesn't like you," and galloped away. Ali was disappointed, he wanted to ride by her, he had never seen anyone quite so fair. The fact of his having exerted himself to mount a horse at all was a proof of his admiration. When he heard the next day that she had left Biskra by car for Algiers I had difficulty in restraining him from pursuit.

"What's the good?" I said. "Her husband is with her. . . ."

"H'm . . . that big Englishman who rides so well?"

He had Ednam in his mind, and the thought of *such* a big Englishman discouraged him.

The last time I ever rode was with Napoleon.

We were picking our way across the *oued* when

ARAB INTERLUDE

suddenly without any warning or provocation our two animals sprang into the air neighing frenziedly and shaking their heads. So sudden was the onslaught that I got a blow in the face as my horse threw his head up, and then he swerved and threw me. I lay all hunched up while horses' hoofs clashed over my head. I succeeded in crawling to safety with nothing worse than a kicked ankle that lamed me for weeks.

We continued our ride, although Napoleon suggested I might prefer to go home, but we kept our distance. Nevertheless I had lost my nerve and never recovered it.

There is nothing more nightmarish than a stallion fight if one is on the animal's back; but as a spectacle it is thrilling.

One day Napoleon came to see us and tied his big white stallion to a palm tree in the yard. Dick's white neighing stallion was tied to a gate at the further end. Antar was in the stable with the door open. As we sat talking in the garden the familiar sound reached us of horses' hoofs and shrieking sounds. Napoleon was on his feet in a jiffy, and without a word ran to the yard gate. The three stallions had broken loose and were fighting madly. I have never seen a more beautiful sight; it was a Chirico picture in movement. Haafa, Nasser, and Lazhari stood open-mouthed, staring and paralysed with fear. Without a moment's hesitation little Napoleon—ashen-white, his mouth set in a hard line—went straight to his horse that towered above him and reached for the bridle. A murmur of surprise and admiration went up from the Arabs. The prestige of Napoleon's name was high that day.

CHAPTER XXXI

Id

WE had promised ourselves, Margaret and I, that we would observe Ramadan. The Fast, which lasts from one new moon to the next, moves forward a month every year, so that in twelve years it has completed the cycle. The year it falls in July or August is the most dreaded. To be unable in such a climate to drink between sunrise and sunset constitutes a torture that some do not survive. The Prophet, who in all else proved himself a practical and thoughtful lawgiver, dealt the Orient a staggering blow when he instituted Ramadan.

I can judge only by the little section I have seen; a people bred in starvation conditions, weakened by intermarriage, congenital disease, the cloistering of women, and the exigencies of the climate, are finally reduced to the lowest physical condition by a fast which the majority still fanatically observe. A ruler who planned to keep his peoples in abject subjection could have devised nothing more efficacious. It may do much to explain the domination that the European is able to exercise over Musulman millions. Only those Musulmen who have come in contact with Occidentalism are immune. The Arab of the desert feels Allah's eye fixed upon him mercilessly; he dare not cheat Allah though he cheat the rest of the world!

ARAB INTERLUDE

I have seen them with raging fever, stricken like an animal that crawls away to die, refusing to take medicine until the sun has set.

Women prefer to lose a new-born child than take food that would preserve the milk in their breasts. Pregnant women resign themselves to a still-born child or to giving birth to a weakling. The misfortune is attributed to the will of Allah. I argued with them, for I had read the Koran, which they could not. I told them the Prophet had decreed that woman with a child in the womb or a child at the breast had a special dispensation. Likewise the adult sick and all young children. But they argued that the Fast had to be observed some time during the year and if they didn't do it at the right time they'd have to do it later. It was easier to do it with everyone else and while life was organised for the purpose than to do it alone.

Besides, those who have not kept the Fast may take no part in the rejoicings of Id. To be excluded from the Feast was unthinkable, and so the mothers languished and the babies cried or faded weakly out.

When we announced our intention of keeping the Fast we met with incredulous looks; the Ben Ganas were sure we would never see it through. The village, sceptical at first, were kept informed by Haafa of our tenacity. Haafa was as concerned for our souls as any Catholic missionary. Because of his affection for us he wished us to win our way to Paradise.

The satisfaction of our village friends and their new attitude towards us was extremely gratifying. We were no longer the "*Inglesias*" but their Musul-

man sisters. Our way of life inferred that we were Musulman. Conversion in the baptismal sense does not exist in the Mohammedan religion; Islam judges not by words but by deeds.

Margaret and I decided we would study this thing. A religion which maintains THERE IS BUT ONE GOD AND HE IS GOD, has a perfectly good universal appeal.

Having decided to read the Koran out loud, I happened to open it at Chapter 4, and read Section 6, concerning husbands and wives: ". . . those [wives] on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping places, AND BEAT THEM."

We looked at each other, and the serio-comic of the situation struck us both. The Koran was folded away.

As a test of character Ramadan is the only excuse for an otherwise inexcusable waste of time, such as my diary records in March 1928 :

"We are at the last day of Ramadan, at least we think it is the last day, but we are not sure. It depends on sighting the new moon, but no new moon will be sighted to-night for there are clouds in the sky.

"According to the Christian Calendar there is a new moon to-night, but the Calendar means nothing to the Musulman.

"It is 4 p.m. One is buoyed up by the feeling that only two more hours remain, but they are long hours, and one is terribly tired and depleted.

ARAB INTERLUDE

Everything is an effort. One's mind is vacant, and one's eyes are swimmy.

"We have grown almost used to getting up without coffee, but the days I can sleep till 11 or 12 (Margaret sometimes sleeps till 1 p.m.) I am tremendously pleased because half the day is over.

"Opinions vary as to the advisability of sleeping late. Some say it is better to get up early and then *sieste*. But I cannot *sieste*, there are too many workmen and people in the garden. No peace.

"The early part of the day one feels merely bored. The second phase is irritability. The third chilliness.

"I always heard that fasting was a good intellectual stimulus, but I find I am absolutely incapable of any mental effort. I forget things or do them wrong. If I read, I read without taking in page after page. My hand is limp. It is easy to say Ramadan is nothing, that if you can eat at night it is not necessary to eat by day. It is not so. I want just to lie about, or sit contemplatively. I don't want to talk or be talked to, I dislike people, they are an effort."

Europeans, not Arabs, were the effort. Our Arab friends lay about as listlessly as ourselves, or played draughts to while away an hour or two. But when someone from Algiers brought the new American Consul to tea the effort to appear interested and animated was very painful. I helped Haafa to prepare the tea and butter the bread; he was fearful lest I succumbed to temptation. He feared I would not be

able to resist the bread. There were only four more days, he said, and I had stood it so long he hoped I would stick it to the end. "Allah will give you strength," he said, as if my spiritual future were his personal responsibility.

The Americans could not understand why we undertook a Fast that was not obligatory. Had it been obligatory they still would not have understood. I was sorry that I was incapable of explaining.

If our days were an agony our nights were colourful.

At about 9 p.m. we would set out in the car for the town. During Ramadan any Musulman may visit any other Musulman, and has but to say "in the name of God" to be hospitably received and fed. Life during Ramadan is run on a kind of communal basis. We would arrive at the Sheikh-el-Arab's and find most of his relations there; eating, drinking (nothing alcoholic), playing games, or gossiping in groups. There were Sheikhs and Caïds from outlying oases, with furrowed faces, penetrating eyes, and hawk noses—fine Southern types—simple, primitive, devout Moslems. The Southerners were always a little intimidated by the presence of myself and Margaret. They were puzzled by the Ben Gana attitude towards us of perfect ease and intimacy. Equally disconcerting was our self-assurance. No European women had ever been claimed as "members of the family" by the clan Ben Gana or any other Arab clan.

Towards midnight a party of us left the Sheikh-el-Arab's to visit Agha Aïssa's house. Aïssa too entertained desert chiefs. Sitting in a circle on the floor round a low Arab table, we partook of the

ARAB INTERLUDE

midnight meal and solemnly murmured *Bismullah*, which is the Moslem grace and means "Thanks be to God." One said it every time after drinking, as one put down the glass.

I have been asked: How could the Arabs be sure we were strictly observing the Fast? My reply is that one cannot pretend. The signs of fasting are unmistakable. Meeting the Sheikh-el-Arab in the town on a late afternoon he scanned my lustreless eyes and remarked with a wan smile:

"Well done! You are still doing it I see. . . . Courage!"

As Margaret and I walked past the village café, outside which a crowd lay about on rush mats, everyone roused himself to salute us and to call down Allah's blessing on us.

Someone called out: "You are Musulman like us," and "We shall go together to Paradise!" Strangers, Nomads out of the desert, greeted us as if they knew us. They knew *about* us and that we were the first Europeans who had chosen deliberately to suffer with them. Our world was temporarily divided into two: Islam and the rest.

On the eve of Id, Hadj, according to my instructions, bought a large fat sheep at the market. If we fasted like good Moslems we meant equally to keep the Feast.

Every Arab during the two previous days had returned from town driving a sheep before him. Ours was a fine sheep indeed, with curly horns. It kept me awake all night with its bleating. Early on the morning of Id the servants, with Ali the Mason

and all his workmen in their best clothes, assembled for the ceremony. I was not present; I had seen it too often. Every time the foundations of a new room were laid, a sheep had to be sacrificed. There was the imprint of a bloody hand for luck on the white wall next to the front door. The sight of an animal with a slit throat, its head forced back, bleeding to death and kicking in its death-throes, was a paganism for which I had little taste. They respected my susceptibilities and faced me with the *fait accompli*.

After the local musicians (flutes and drums) had serenaded us and been appropriately appreciated, I distributed the sheep among the household and the workmen. Many were the blessings invoked as we saluted one another according to tradition, that is by kissing one's finger-tips after touching the other's hand.

The salutations over, we hurried off to THE PRAYER, which took place on an eminence outside the village. This eminence was, in fact, the ruins of the Turkish fort. Built of mud, it had crumbled into a vast and most convenient mound. Here the faithful arrived from every direction, ranged themselves in rows and removed their shoes. The Sheikh-el-Arab was not present, he attended prayer in his private mosque, but most of the family were there praying with the poorest Arabs in serried rows. The prayer was led by an Imam enthroned in an earthen pulpit. Tourists with kodaks photographed the great white disciplined mass. As one man, the genuflecting hundreds bowed their heads to the earth in the direction of Mecca.

After the prayer we raced home and barely had

ARAB INTERLUDE

time to drink coffee before the village children arrived. From every house the little boys in their bright new *gondourahs* brought their sisters, arrayed in bewilderingly brilliant colours. They carried babies in their arms, all the baby brothers and sisters, with flies in the corners of their eyes, running noses and gold-fringed headgear! Each received a coloured bag full of coloured sweets tied up with bright ribbons. Margaret had been making these bags for days. The children knew what to expect, for this distribution on the Feast of Id had become a habit.

The little negresses behaved like savages, snatching out of turn and accumulating more than their share. Their lack of deportment provoked reproof on the part of the sedate little Arab girls and their brothers.

After that we motored into town, where every Arab had on a new suit. They got together in parties, hired motors and drove around at a crazy speed, singing and shouting.

On arrival at the house of the Sheikh-el-Arab we received the greetings of every servant and retainer. In the long reception-room we found Sheikhs, Caïds and Aghas from far and near, friends and acquaintances, business men, horse-dealers, sheep-breeders, date-merchants, the Kadi, in fact every Arab who was of any note or very little. All came to pay their respects. The ceremonial occasion imposed itself even upon us with a solemnity that provoked a twinkle—but no more—in the eyes of our Chief; we embraced him and were embraced on both cheeks. Without a smile we bowed to the assembled crowd, mostly greybeards, and solemnly

departed. At Aïssa's house it was different. The yard was full of his little nephews and nieces, the children of the Sheikh-el-Arab and the children of all the slaves and retainers. A joyous crowd, luminous and scintillating in the radiant sunlight.

Having greeted Aïssa we made our way into the inner courtyard, where the ladies were all dressed up and covered with jewels awaiting visitors.

Aïssa's wife was the Sheikh-el-Arab's sister, a Sultana in every sense of the word. Although young she was enormous, but her head was well poised, she had the power to intimidate those who didn't know that she was intimidated; they were a gorgeous sight, all those women who for weeks had been planning, designing, consulting Zooka and one another concerning their new dresses for the great day. Zooka's agent from Tunis had produced heavily embroidered veils and materials that were unprocurable in Algeria. All this finery was to be seen only by one another and for a brief moment by brother and nephew.

"Alfonso" came in from next door, roused from his customary lethargy and resplendent in a beige silk suit embroidered with wild-flowers. As we were taking our leave the Sheikh-el-Arab arrived. His attitude to his sister was graciously condescending, devoid of any appearance of intimacy. His presence inspired awe; he was greeted with respect and restrained affection.

From Aïssa's house we went on to Ali, whose wife was the most beautiful, the best jewelled, and the least visited. At each house we drank coffee flavoured with orange blossom, and ate innumerable honey-

ARAB INTERLUDE

cakes, until, finally replete, feeling rather sick and exceedingly tired (for we had been on the go since dawn), we returned home. During the rest of the day, in our favourite place on the terrace overlooking the *oued*, we awaited our friends who came singly or in groups to return our visit. Retainers from the various Ben Gana houses arrived at intervals with trays full of sweets and cakes, offerings from the ladies of the family who little realised the distance that separated us from the town.

CHAPTER XXXII

For Honour's Sake

ONE morning early I found Nasser, Ali the Mason, and Haafa in confab. Lazhari, with more than usually twinkling eyes, was standing close, drinking in all that the men were saying. The workmen smoked their cigarettes inertly and stared at the little green blot that was Filièche across the river. I sensed something unusual. Nasser looked at me shyly, and Ali had an expression peculiar to him whenever there was something of import to communicate. But he was a slow starter, he generally beat about the bush no matter what the subject or the urgency. On this occasion the sound of jingling anklets robbed him of his chance. The daily courier in the guise of Saulea arrived to tell the tale before he could; Saulea was visibly excited. Her henna'd fingers twitched at her veil. She kicked off her shoes and sat down on the mat.

There was even greater tension than the day Binks brought up a half-chewed new-born baby from the *oued*. Ali the Mason (who had suffered from Binks and sworn vengeance) declared the dog had been into a Nomad tent and stolen the baby out of its cradle! Haafa was sure the baby had been thrown away because it was a girl, and that jackals and hyenas had done the mutilation. While the discussion raged,

ARAB INTERLUDE

Sadok—the chief workman—wrapped the baby in a newspaper, picked up a shovel, plucked a hibiscus flower, and went off quietly to the Arab cemetery at our gate.

This time, however, the drama was of another order. It was a simple straightforward murder. But because it happened so near home and barely an hour before we got the news, it created a sensation. Saulea had the details, Haafa and Ali stood by to listen: A woman at Filièche had gone to the well . . . a detail which in itself provoked discussion: Why should a woman go to the well? No woman in M'cid ever went to the village pump. Why hadn't the woman's husband fetched the water? All Saulea could say was that the husband was working in his plantation when it happened. Perhaps, suggested Saulea tentatively, the customs of Filièche differed from our own. Maybe the women of Filièche were accustomed to draw water at the well. The fact remained, and a man passing by had come up to the woman and spoken to her. Here were two scandals in a nutshell: (1) The woman going to the well; (2) The man speaking to her. But there was a third and worse scandal: The woman LET FALL HER VEIL. Someone saw her, the proverbial "someone" who always sees everything, and knows nothing better than to go and tell. Someone therefore ran to the husband working in his plantation and told him.

The husband returned immediately, and the woman seeing him arrive before the expected hour, and with a knife in his hand, knew she had been found out. She ran shrieking from the house. He pursued her

FOR HONOUR'S SAKE

to the *oued*, caught her cowering in a crevice and cut her throat. He then came to town and gave himself up. Even as we scanned the opposite bank we saw the scarlet municipal dust-cart that had been sent to fetch the corpse.

Ali was thoughtful and expressed no opinion. Haafa looked troubled; he didn't say whether he would have done the same under the circumstances, but it was evident that each considered it from a personal angle. For every woman in the village it was an example and a warning. I could see that Saulea was thanking Almighty Allah who had made her a negress!

Later in the day Abdellah came to see us. I could always tell his mood from afar by his walk. Sometimes he had the spirits of a schoolboy, at other times he could be pompous, serious, irritable or abjectly depressed. I was sure he knew about the murder, for Filièche was in military territory and therefore under the administration of the Sheikh-el-Arab. As he walked across the garden I detected his aggressive mood. He knew my feminist reactions and was prepared for a clash. Concerning the murder there was nothing we could tell him that he didn't know. The murderer had given himself up to the Sheikh-el-Arab and Abdellah was a witness of his confession.

"And what did the Sheikh-el-Arab do?" I asked.

Abdellah looked vague; what could the Sheikh-el-Arab do? He gave him a clean suit to replace his blood-stained clothes and sent him under care of his

ARAB INTERLUDE

servants to get a wash and brush-up. He would be tried in a few days by the military tribunal.

"And shot?" I suggested.

"And acquitted, of course."

"Why?"

Abdellah explained irritably: "You know quite well that when an Arab woman speaks with a man it is not to discuss politics or literature. There is only one subject that a man and a woman of my race can talk about. . . ."

"Well . . .?"

I stared hard at the man, who had a French education, who went to Paris every year, and had international friendships.

"*Eh bien!* . . ." he repeated defiantly, "he was justified."

"Justified—in killing his wife because she spoke to a man? Do you mean that you would do the same?"

"For the honour of the family, yes. . . ."

CHAPTER XXXIII

Uncle and Niece

ENTERTAINING the ideas he did, perhaps it was as well that Abdellah remained unmarried. There were always rumours about his engagement, but he remained obstinately a bachelor.

The Sheikh-el-Arab planned to marry him to his sister, an honour that Abdellah failed to appreciate. The bride was known to be thirty, and of irascible temper. Prolonged virginity had soured her. There were other available brides, young cousins who took an undue interest in him; but he could not marry one without the Chief's consent. Abdellah had almost a romantic reputation in the family. He was young, handsome, and gay. He and his brother Brahim had built themselves a fantastic house on the outskirts of the town, a house that was worthy of a fairy-tale bride. Every window was flanked by little marble columns, his drawing-room had supporting columns like a mosque, shutters and doors were of carved cedar-wood. Lights were concealed in plaster bowls inlaid with coloured glass. But the inner courtyard was the gem: The colonnade was supported by columns, each carved with a different design. In the centre there was a little fountain that trickled into a basin of coloured *faience* tiles. It was generally said that I was responsible for the design and decoration. The

ARAB INTERLUDE

truth was that we both compared notes as each other's building progressed. The Sheikh-el-Arab disapproved of Abdellah's house, he could not allow any member of the family to have a finer house than his. He was therefore put to the trouble and expense of rebuilding and redecorating his own. Meanwhile Abdellah, rather than marry the wife of his Chief's choice, preferred to remain unmarried. The Sheikh-el-Arab was extremely anxious to marry off his sister, for whom no husband of her own age had been available. Abdellah should have been amenable. It was inconceivable that he should not appreciate the honour that was being conferred upon him. But Abdellah dreamed of a young and lovely bride, he remained elusive. And so that year the Sheikh-el-Arab, to prove his displeasure, went to Paris without him.

One day Abdellah arrived with a very grave face, something utterly unexpected and bewildering had happened to him.

According to Moslem law a woman who loses her parents or husband becomes the responsibility of her next of kin. In this case the guardianship of a niece had devolved upon him. The child had lost her parents; already she and her young brother were installed in his house. Finished were Abdellah's careless bachelor days. The problem lay before him of organising his household as if he were married. The little girl must have servants, that is to say women who would be shut up with her. Having no mother or sisters, Abdella's house was absolutely unprepared for female habitation. I never saw a man

UNCLE AND NIECE

more dejected. She was so young too, he was afraid she would be lonely. At the moment she wept continually for her mother. He hoped we would come and see her often, to distract her.

Tissa had a profile that was a Greek medal: a lovely oval face, huge eyes, and indescribable charm. She was pathetic, lonely, and adorable. She became Margaret's best friend, and in those early days even Dick was allowed to play with her. The brother Mohamed was a mischievous good-looking boy who gave Abdellah plenty of trouble and whose idea of fun was to torment his sister. There are rare individuals to whom one reacts regardless of age or nationality. Tissa did more to rouse revolt in my soul than any Arab woman it has been my privilege to know. Sometimes I had the impression that she was a changeling. She had spirit, intelligence, humour, and daring. With the passing years she grew to resent the curtailment of her liberty. Perhaps knowing us was a disturbing element. She resigned herself with difficulty to a world that was safe for Margaret and not safe for her. After a while Abdellah sensed that she was not quite as submissive as other Arab girls, and it made him savage. Our friendship, which up to that time had been sound and secure, suddenly took on a new aspect. It was like the palm trees in my garden that had been cared for, and then starved, but finally flourished. There were moments when Abdellah's capricious behaviour as regards Tissa turned us against him. Months during which we did not speak to one another. Then suddenly he would forgive and we

ARAB INTERLUDE

for Tissa's sake) would forget, and for a time all would run smooth.

Occasionally he did incredibly generous things, but which he regretted afterwards. For instance, he brought Tissa one night after dark in a curtained car to spend the evening with us. Such a thing had never been heard of. Aïssa Ben Gana would never have brought his wife, nor "Alfonso" his sisters. The fact was that Abdellah had grown very fond of Tissa, and as she was only his niece he felt none of the instinctive jealousy that would have prevented him from bringing a wife. At the same time she was more to him than a sister. He would not have troubled to bring a sister if he had had one, but he was just sufficiently interested in Tissa and disinterested to want to give her pleasure. For her it was a great adventure. She had never seen a house like ours, nor such a garden. He was free to wander about unveiled, as the servants had gone back to their homes in the village. The night was warm, full of the scent of orange blossom and datura. Tissa was like a little fluttering bird that had been let out of a cage and did not know where to hover.

Abdellah's brother Brahim, who was an uncouth anatomical Sheikh of a neighbouring oasis, happened to be at home that night. Although he was a younger brother he dared to scold and threaten. Knowledge of such an indiscretion gave him the whiphand. He could now blackmail his brother to the end of time. Abdellah chewed his blond moustache and was overwhelmed with regret. Naturally it was the last time that Tissa ever was allowed out.

UNCLE AND NIECE

One day Brahim discovered that his niece had an album full of views of our house and snapshots of various members of the family taken in our garden. He snatched it away from her and requested that I should never bring her books again, especially not photographs of her male cousins and uncles whom she had never seen.

Another day, after Dick had been to see her and brought her a necklace of big turquoise beads, Abdellah wrote me a letter couched in the most insolent language: We took too much for granted, we had violated Moslem traditions. I must surely know that Dick (aged fourteen) was too old to be admitted to the women's quarter. Would I please tell him that he was never to see Tissa again. And as Margaret and I aroused in his niece ideas that were wholly unsuited to a well-brought-up Moslem girl, he begged that we also should discontinue our visits. In fact his house was no longer open to us. After that we cut him dead in the street, and turned our backs on him when we met him at the Sheikh-el-Arab's. The quarrel was too absurd to be pursued, and a few weeks later he came rather shamefacedly to ask us to go and see Tissa. I found her trying to ride her brother's bicycle round the yard. That, too, was an innovation for an Arab girl. Her long skirts got frightfully in the way, and of course she fell. But the exertion had put a little colour into her cheeks, her eyes were sparkling with laughter.

She had none of the usual Arab listlessness, and as idleness exasperated her Margaret taught her to knit. She knitted so hard and so fast that it was difficult

ARAB INTERLUDE

to keep her in wools. She made shawls for herself and for her servants. She made scarves for her brother and her uncles. I used to smile seeing Abdellah that winter wrapped in a wide orange and violet *cache-nez*! To employ her time she kept Abdellah's room in order, tidied his clothes, and mended them as soon as Margaret had given her a workbox.

In the presence of Mohomed she never spoke, knowing that he repeated everything to his uncles. But as it was her woman's right to turn him out of her courtyard she would use her prerogative. Abdellah had entrusted her with the household stores and young Mohomed's fixed idea was to get at the sugar. Tissa was prepared to defend it with her fists. These were little incidents, but they led to bigger. Abdellah came one day to ask us NEVER to see her again, for of course whatever she did that was wrong was indirectly our faults. He then proceeded to relate her crime:

If he were to be believed, Tissa had walked out of the house unveiled and had climbed up to the tower that stood on a high rock just outside the house. The tower had served as a fort at the time of the conquest and was long since obsolete and deserted. Her uncle was the more furious with her because she wept and would not acknowledge her misdeed. He had hastily walked out of the room for fear he should be tempted to beat her; he had found it hard to keep his hands off her. Instead he had beaten the wife of Brahım's servant who was supposed to look after her.

The misdeed had been reported by Mohomed and

UNCLE AND NIECE

had no other witness. I rounded on Abdel' for believing the boy and disbelieving Tissa, who was worth ten of her brother.

Masculine solidarity obliged him to side with his nephew, but he seemed shaken by my belief in Tissa's innocence. Later Mohomed confessed; the story had been his invention, Tissa had refused to let him take the sugar and he had vowed revenge. He wanted to see her receive a beating. That she did not was a great disappointment to him. Abdellah felt badly about the whole thing, but he did not like to admit his mistake. He forgave Tissa and showered her with gifts, but it was not until the whole thing had subsided, until in fact summer had scattered us afar, that he allowed us to see her in the fall of the year.

As Tissa grew up she used to ask a good deal after Dick, whom she remembered; and as Dick grew older and heard her discussed he began to think it would be rather fun to scale the wall and carry her off! We used to plan the details until it seemed a feasible thing to do. It would have been fun to watch the girl evolve in London or Paris, opening wide her big eyes to a world that surpassed all her imagining. We planned her dresses and how she should do her hair. The scandal in our family if Dick produced an Arab wife! But Dick was still a boy. What appealed to him was the adventure of stealing her and of "doing Abdel' in the eye"! It would have finished us for ever with the Ben Ganas. Not that Dick was not good enough, but that he was not a Moslem.

ARAB INTERLUDE

She liked to talk of Paris. She would put on Margaret's hat and coat and accompany us to the outer door, telling her old servant: "I am going with them to Paris." It was a form of make-believe of which she never tired. On the occasion when we said good-bye to her because we actually were leaving for Paris there were tears in her eyes.

One day brother Mohomed overheard the joke about "going to Paris." He had lost power to make trouble for Tissa with his Uncle Abdel', but his Uncle Brahim never failed to react. The result was another year during which we were forbidden to see her.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"Baby"

"BABY" was so called because he had a sweet, round, young face and an ingenuous manner. He was naughty too. He followed us the whole of one season wherever we went in town. He followed us into shops, and seated himself in the café at the nearest table and stared. Of course Margaret was the object of all this attention, and she was furious. That the thunder of her looks did not intimidate him said much for his courage. One couldn't help noticing "Baby," for he dressed as smartly as any of the Ben Ganas. They laughed rather acidly and explained that he was a person of humble origin and no importance. His cousin was a common tourist guide.

A less virile young man might have looked effeminate, dressed from head to foot in shiny white silk, but "Baby" was tall and broad. The colour of his skin would have delighted Augustus John. His real name was . . . well no matter!

One day a Rumanian prince (they were always princes when they were not counts or barons; a special peerage might have been compiled for the use of Biskris) invited us to a picnic lunch at Chetma, the oasis that was a distant dark-green smudge on the landscape towards the foothills. When we got there

ARAB INTERLUDE

he introduced us to . . . "Baby"! The picnic was in "Baby's" garden.

I have been to a good many picnics in Arab gardens but this one is unforgettable.

To shade us from the glare of midday "Baby" had contrived an awning. It was made entirely of *haafs* borrowed from his sisters. A *haaf* is a piece of wide material five yards long that the married women drape around them in an ancient Roman way. magenta and orange, crimson with gold-woven flowers, and pink and green stripes on a yellow background, were stretched across from a fig tree to an apricot. The fig branches outside made a shadow pattern on the awning, and the leaves under the awning took on crimson high-lights and purple veins.

Beneath this luminous canopy sat "Baby" cross-legged on a camel-hair carpet of vivid pattern. His white silk suit and turban reflected the colours of the *haafs*. He was simply opalescent, a human pearl!

The Pole, meticulously dressed, ringed and braceleted, read aloud from a little book called *Chants de la Caravane*. These songs were written by El Akheder before the French conquest. There is one that records the yearly trek of the Ben Ganas to the mountains:

LE CHEIKH-EL-ARAB

Les nobles Ouled Ben Gana joignent l'honneur à la bravoure
Ils montent des chevaux rapides comme l'éclair qui ravit
la vue, des cavales de race aux selles brodées d'or.

Leur fiers cavaliers portent des vêtements de Tunis et de
Tlemcen, d'une valeur inestimable, et des armes de prix,
façonnées à Stamboul.

“BABY”

A la tête de leurs tribus ils marchent vers le Tell

Les litières parées de brocart et les palanquins cheminent sans se heurter. On croirait voir une prairie, que les pluies d'automne ont fleurie, onduler sous le vent.

Ils transportent des monceaux de richesses, des trésors fabuleux, qu'ils gardent depuis le règne du prophète Elie.

Ce sont de nobles chérifs, à qui leurs ancêtres ont transmis des arbres généalogiques.

Ils emportent des matelas doux comme la rose, des coussins de laine éclatants comme les couleurs du printemps, et des tapis dessinés par des artistes de Constantinople

Les nobles dames sont à l'abri, derrière les tentures

Le chef de ces seigneurs devient célèbre avant le jeune.

Avant même que sa barbe eut paru, il se montra homme d'épée, et sa gloire nouvelle éclipse celle des plus fameux guerriers, on cessa de parler d'eux pour ne s'entretenir que de lui.

Il s'avance sur un courier gris pommelé, dont la robe est pareille à celle du pigeon ramier, et dont la crinière, touffue comme une treille, retombe à droite sur l'encolure.

Lorsque son cavalier le touche de l'étrier, ce cheval impétueux mâche le mors de sa bride, et ses sabots d'acier réduisent en poussière le sol de la campagne rocheuse.

Les Ouled Ben Gana sont en marche vers le Tell

El Akheder a composé cette poésie. Il a deux flûtistes, et sa réputation est universelle. Il est connu comme le croissant qui annonce la fête après le mois de jeune

Close by flowed a clear rippling stream ; the sound of the running water was like a musical accompaniment to the Polish voice. We whiled away the hours, reclining lazily among mountains of cushions, eating honey-cakes and fruits, talking, dozing—like Persian women in a poem of Hafiz.

“Baby's” relations, who had waited upon us but not eaten with us, dozed in the shade a little distance

ARAB INTERLUDE

away. He had a brother-in-law with the face of a degenerate Roman emperor. They got up and left the garden at the prayer hour, and I suppose they prayed somewhere out of sight; but "Baby" flung down his burnous a few paces from us and knelt upon it. He prayed quite unself-consciously, and with the expression of a Seraphim. He was a fanatical Moslem, prayed five times a day, never touched wine or alcohol, studied the Koran and tried to observe meticulously the Prophet's law.

I was surprised to find that he lived in a peasant house, and that his mother, sisters, sister-in-law, and female cousins were shabbily dressed. It was evident that whatever the financial resources were of the family, "Baby" spent it all on himself. His father had died when he was young and the traditional cousin had acted as guardian. A good deal of money had gone into the guardian's pockets. The youngest of the sisters held a minute weakling baby in her arms; she looked frail and sad. "Baby" admitted rather shamefacedly that his sister was too young to have a child. It was the fault of their guardian, who had married her to his son when she was only twelve.

"Baby's" mother adored him. She had character and personality and the remains of good looks. She eyed us curiously and seemed anxious to talk, but "Baby" didn't give her the chance. Like all young men who feel that their mothers love them too much, he was shy, a little resentful, and tried to push her into the background.

As "Baby" had no car he was forced to ride a good

"BABY"

deal. He rode any spirited untrained young horse. When he offered to ride with Margaret she accepted, if for no other reason than to put the Ben Ganas to shame, who were too listless, too lazy to get on to a horse. That "Baby" should dare to ride with Margaret roused at least their indignation. They resented, too, his elegance. The Ben Ganas would not tolerate competition, they alone had the right to spread peacock tails!

Emboldened by his new friendships "Baby" evolved an attitude of confidence and equality. He even dared to join us when we were with Ben Ganas. He would interrupt us when we were talking with Aïssa, and adopted an attitude of familiarity towards Abdellah. The Ben Ganas were snubby at first, and then became patronising. The apparent friendship of one or two of them roused my suspicion. It was only a matter of time, one of them told me, and "Baby" would be ruined. There was no hurry about it. Meanwhile "Baby" was blissfully unconscious of webs being woven around him.

Through him we learnt a side of Arab life that we might never have suspected. His cousin was in open rebellion against the Sheikh-el-Arab. The Ben Ganas half-suspected that we were learning about things they had rather we did not know. "Baby's" cousin roused a whole tribe to revolt. The Governor-General was obliged to come to Biskra to pronounce judgment. No easy matter: the Sheikh-el-Arab was in the wrong, but he was a loyal subject of the French and a valuable friend. "Baby's" cousin was arrested, his land was seized. "Baby" did himself no good by

ARAB INTERLUDE

going to see his cousin in prison. From time to time I heard about "Baby's" debts and that he was mortgaging his date plantations.

One day his mother called upon us. For a woman to set out alone from Chetma and then walk out from Biskra to our village was something like an adventure. She was heavily veiled and arrived during the heat of midday. Her manner had all the authority of age; her beautiful lined face, fine aquiline nose and sad deep-sunk eyes, reminded one of a certain noble type, an Arab Madame Letitia. She knew that her son was a constant visitor at our house; he valued our friendship, and we had it in our power, she said, to influence him. She made us promise we would never let him know that she had been to see us. The object of her visit was to beg that we would use our influence to make him marry and settle down in his own oasis. Her love and anxiety made her sublimely pathetic, she seemed to have a foreboding of trouble. The Rumanian prince, however, introduced "Baby" to young Baron de Graffenried (whose wife was a Gould), and they invited him to visit them that summer at Juan-les-Pins. "Baby" had never left Algeria, he had in fact never been as far even as Algiers. Here was his chance to rival the Ben Ganas, he too would go to France!

The tales that were told of "Baby" on the Côte d'Azur would fill a volume. He was astonished first of all by his room, its furniture, the bathroom, the maid who brought him his coffee in the morning, the valet who attended to his clothes. And as he would not eat a chicken unless he killed it himself in

"BABY"

proper Muslim fashion, he was source of considerable entertainment to the cook.

The first time he saw the bathers on the *plage* he was so shocked that he hid his head in the hood of his burnous. He soon got over the first shock, however, and the next thing that happened was his photograph with Mistinguette in the illustrated papers. After that he got engaged to a French-born Egyptian princess, but as she had to get her divorce before they could marry, "Baby" returned to Biskra to make the necessary preparations. He talked rather grandly about the house he was going to build for her. He showed me her passionate love-letters and the photograph of a rather flashy "come hither" looking lady who disported a yashmak. Abdellah showed me the letter she wrote to the Sheikh-el-Arab asking for information as to her fiancé's social status!

In a French newspaper of later date I read of the suicide on the Côte d'Azur of the Franco-Egyptian princess.

CHAPTER XXXV

From Desert to Mountain

“BABY” asked me if I would be willing to motor him and a friend of his to a village in the Aurès mountains. His friend had married a Choua (mountain race) and had business to transact with his mother-in-law. In return for the use of my car he and his friend offered me a night’s hospitality, the idea being to combine their business with my pleasure.

For four years I had contemplated those mountains. They rise straight up out of the desert, or perhaps more accurately the Sahara flows undulating from their feet. The range forms a massive rampart against the north. The shadows of clouds splash them by day with dark blue blotches like ink. At sunset they are flame colour and indigo.

They were the natural object of contemplation when one’s eyes had travelled over the desert and found no repose. Sitting under my olive tree on the garden’s edge, I had so often wondered what life could be up there, just as one wonders about the moon. The desert Arabs talked about the mountains as of another planet: women were free, unveiled—there were fresh cool streams, green-leafed trees—snow!

All our expeditions had taken us south; our

FROM DESERT TO MOUNTAIN

Occidental friends were insatiable where the desert was concerned. Always they wanted to see more of the desert, the mountain did not arouse their curiosity. I was glad of an opportunity, therefore, to explore the mountain. Dick especially was delighted, for the month was April and the plain (as we call the desert) was hot and glaring. He welcomed the prospect of a cool day and night. "Baby" had not warned us that his friend Sakhri weighed 113 kilos. A mountainous avalanche of a man (all muscle and no fat) wrapped in several burnouses in anticipation of the cold. He produced a sack of dates as a present to his mother-in-law. How the rest of the party stowed themselves was a jig-saw puzzle.

We sped steadily northward until we reached Batna; there we branched eastward and took the road to Timgad, the Pompeii of North Africa. In the midst of Roman ruins we branched off again in a direction south.

For us it began to be unknown land. The Renault roared up the winding corkscrew roads. The machine grew hot (with Sakhri's weight) and the air grew cool. Heavenly freshness after the savage heat below!

In some of the shady ravines the snow still lingered; we stopped to enable Dick and Margaret to snowball each other. Sakhri, like a great hippo, heaved himself out on to the road and gathered snow in both hands. He rubbed it all over his face and neck and put what remained into his mouth.

The higher we went the more women we saw. This seemed strange, having accustomed oneself to a world where man only is visible. The sight of them

ARAB INTERLUDE

affected our desert Arab. One needs to live in the desert an appreciable time to realise what seeing a woman means. Sakhri begged me to stop the car so that he might speak to one. He had learned from his wife the language of the Chouias. What he said to the young woman I could not understand, but she giggled and looked shy becomingly. She was round and strong, rather like a Russian peasant. her head was turbaned, her skirts ample and reaching to her bare feet. Whatever he said she took it in the proper spirit, laughed, ran to her man, linked her arm in his, and told him all about it. He looked fierce like all the mountain men, but she was not afraid of him. I was anxious about Sakhri and accelerated. Down in the plain death would have awaited the woman and Sakhri also for his impudence. Sakhri knew it and the knowledge fascinated him.

As I drove on I asked: "Was your wife once free like that?"

"Certainly she was."

"And you took the wild bird and put her in a cage? How unhappy she must be!"

He revolved the matter in his mind.

"It is like this," he began; "here the women are free but they are of no importance except as beasts of burden. With us women are shut up but they do not work, they are petted and spoiled, they have nothing to do but dress up and look pretty for their man. They play an important part too in our lives, they have the power to influence. Which would you prefer?"

The mountain villages consisted of stone, cube-

FROM DESERT TO MOUNTAIN

shaped houses nestling close on a hill-top, not unlike the villages in northern Italy. The end of the day was approaching; Sahkri bade me stop. The village that was to harbour us that night stood half-way up the mountain-side and seemed from the road completely inaccessible.

"How do you get there?"

"We walk——"

My eyes followed the curves of a winding goat-track.

"And the car——?"

"Remains here."

"Here! By the roadside?"

"Certainly. It will be quite safe. You can leave anything in it you like."

"But are you sure?"

"Quite sure. Before dark I will send someone down to sleep in it."

Our suit-cases, however, had to be carried up to the village, as well as Sahkri's sack of dates half as large as himself. We dumped the things on the road and I looked round helplessly. I felt not at all inclined to carry my own luggage, and I knew by experience that the children would not carry theirs. Sahkri put his hands to his mouth, megaphone-like, and shouted. His voice reverberated against the hill-side and brought white figures to the distant roof-tops. Suddenly the whole village came to life.

"Mother-in-law!" he shouted again and again in the language of the Kabyles; "Mother-in-law!"

We sat down and waited. The valley at our feet was charming to desert-tired eyes. A stream flowed

ARAB INTERLUDE

between green trees. A walnut shed its shade, vines entwined wildly among the fruit-tree branches. There was green grass along its banks. Green grass—and the sound of running water! I thought I had never seen anything more lovely.

At last Sakhri's mother-in-law appeared. We watched her descent along the rough goat-track. She was barefoot and came at the trot, several men with her. They greeted Sakhri heartily. One took our coats, another a suit-case, and upon the back of his mother-in-law Sakhri loaded the heavy sack of dates. He then started empty-handed to climb the steep hill-side.

Perhaps the woman looked older than her years: she was wizened and lined, her eyes had sunk deep into her head, the skin around the mouth was drawn tight. She looked like an old smiling mummy. The sight of her bent double under the load of dates was intolerable. I said as much to Sakhri. He laughed good-naturedly.

Half-way up, when she stopped to rest, I insisted that the man who carried our coats should carry her dates. Our coats were distributed among us, and Sakhri condescended to carry one.

The village, assembled on the flat roofs, watched our slow ascent.

The Caïd received us. He was sipping coffee outside the *bureau*, his official workroom. His son, a good-looking youth, acted as interpreter.

Our belongings were deposited in the *bureau* and we were led off to the café on the roof of the building next highest to the mosque. The smoke

FROM DESERT TO MOUNTAIN

from the rooms beneath came up through chimneys formed by Roman earthenware pots with their bottoms knocked out. It would have seemed no more strange if smoke had come out through a top-hat, as in *Peter Pan*.

The men of the village assembled to watch us and to question Sakhri concerning us. The Caïd's son carried off Dick on a shooting expedition.

A group of little boys rhythmically intoned the Koran, sitting in a circle at the foot of the mosque wall. It was a pleasant sound.

The air grew chilly, we drew our woollen burnouses around us. The crowd came closer, and one who spoke French overcame his shyness and talked to us.

"Who is the red-haired man?" I asked, indicating a conspicuous figure in the forefront of the crowd.

"That is our Marabout."

In the desert the Marabouts, descendants of the Prophet, are usually negroid. The Prophet apparently had many offspring by coloured concubines. To-day these holy men bleed the people white. The Arabs attribute special powers to the Prophet's descendants and are assured by them of a place in Paradise, according to the price paid by the individual believer.

Whether the mountain Marabout was of the Prophet's blood I do not know. The mountain people are reputed of Roman descent. The red-haired, white-faced Marabout might indeed have had a European origin.

I asked our interpreter, a strong, well-built, young fellow: "What work do you do?"

"I do no work!" he answered proudly.

ARAB INTERLUDE

I wondered if I had mistaken a rich landowner for a poor man and felt nonplussed. Another man in the crowd, who could speak a few words, laughed:

"The only work he does is to play cards in the café!"

"Ah, I see, you are a gentleman of leisure! But the others—what is their occupation?"

"Nothing."

"What! No one works?"

"No one works."

I looked over the edge and beheld two women—one young and one old—struggling up the track, each with a goatskin on her back filled with water.

"Is that the only way?" I asked.

It was so. The water was hauled up from the stream in the valley. The women hauled it.

"You grow vegetables?"

"A few."

To judge from the little cultivated squares, each grew sufficient unto his own needs, and the women did the tilling.

"How do you earn?"

"We don't earn. What would one do with money?"

Yes, indeed. What? No one had any ambition to own a gramophone or a wireless. There was no cinema. They did not need these things because they did not know them. Instead of a gramophone someone played the flute.

The cold increased as the light faded. We were taken by our friends to visit a house where we were received by three sisters. One was married, one was a widow, and the youngest was a pale, frail little

FROM DESERT TO MOUNTAIN

virgin. Sakhri looked at her acquisitively and consulted me:

"What do you think of her?"

He was impressed by my corroboration of his judgment.

"Then you do think she's pretty?"

"Of course."

"It seems a pity to leave her here to get worn out with hard work. Supposing I took her back——"

"Now look here," I said severely; "you've taken one away and shut her up. Leave this one alone."

"I could do with another," he said wistfully.

The girl was like a young bird who has not yet dared attempt to fly. Her immaturity and innocence were seductive. Her big eyes, however, were full of apprehensive fear. The future must have held terror for her, terror if she remained up in the mountain, terror if she went down into the desert.

Sakhri was exceedingly bowled over.

"I would like . . ." he said; "I will think about it."

I thought I read in his small, shrewd eyes an intention to return later.

That night we slept in the Caïd's official *bureau*. It consisted of two rooms with a communicating door. During our absence the earth floor had been swept. There was no furniture, but the rugged rock upon which it was built formed a platform on which mattresses were placed. Sheets and blankets were produced by our hospitable host. He and his son waited upon us at dinner but would not eat with us. Three or four courses were brought from his house across the road. While we were eating, a small

ARAB INTERLUDE

frightened boy arrived and handed me a letter. It was addressed to: *Messieurs les Voyageurs*, abominably worded and spelt, but I understood that it was from the Marabout, although written in the third person. It welcomed us to the village, assured us how glad everyone was to have the honour of our presence in their midst, but as they were very poor would I very kindly give "a few notes of ten or twenty francs for the Marabout?"

I sent fifty with my good wishes.

After dinner the Marabout, with smiling dignity, came and sat on the floor and finished the remains of the dishes. He was quite unself-conscious and affected not to know of any letter or of any money.

By nine o'clock we were alone. The village was as silent as the dead. In contrast to the oasis where dogs bark, frogs croak raucously, crickets sing, and the wind whines through the palm tops, the mountain was utterly silent. Not a human, a dog, or an insect could be heard; and there happened to be no wind. The silence was awesome.

Happily we had brought sleeping-bags and discarded the generous Caïd's blankets. Even so, our night was disturbed. We were devoured by fleas. It was a relief to get up with the first dawn of light. Whispering groups were already assembled outside the door. In answer to my request for water to wash, the Caïd's son brought me a coffee-pot full. Afterwards it was filled with coffee for breakfast.

While we were breakfasting, the same small boy returned with another letter. Sahkri shamefacedly seized it and tried to prevent me reading it. He had

FROM DESERT TO MOUNTAIN

guessed . . . he knew the people, above all he knew the Marabout! But I secured possession of it and read:

“Our Marabout is so pleased with you, and you are such generous travellers, would you mind giving a few notes of twenty or fifty for the Marabout’s son, he is poor also!”

Sahkri sent back a gruff reply. Such begging was contrary to all the laws of Arab hospitality as it is understood in the desert. The mountain Marabout was making the most of the first Europeans in the village.

A few weeks later a woman in the Biskra market-place rushed up to me and shook me by the hand, hailing me as a friend. I stared and stared again—it was the eldest of the three sisters of the mountain village. Chouia she might be, but in the eyes of desert Arabs an unveiled woman was no better than a prostitute.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Sahkri . . .” she said with a giggle, “sent for me. . . .”

“I know, your little sister . . .”

She nodded.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Desert Neighbours

SAHARAN travellers (and there is a little band who style themselves "Saharan") will not admit that anyone knows the Sahara who has not been further than 500 kilometres south. Nevertheless the Ben Ganas, who are of Nomadic origin, have never strayed beyond the vicinity of Biskra and its neighbouring oases. The South holds no lure for them. The Sheikh-el-Arab maintains that the desert is the same wherever you go.

Desert wanderings were Dick's holiday treat and the children were never so pleased as when the car got stuck in a sand-drift. The idea of having to sleep out appealed to them at all times. When he first came to England, Dick complained about the lack of adventure in motoring: There is a spice of adventure in feeling that you may not reach your objective and not being sure of sleeping the coming night in a bed. The chances too of running short of food and water constitute a pleasant uncertainty.

It was my ignorance of things mechanical that made our Saharan trips so chancey. Dick prided himself on knowing how to take the engine down and put it together again, but his prowess did not impress the French proprietor of the Biskra garage, who, on hearing that I was setting out for Ouargla, begged

DESERT NEIGHBOURS

me to accept a shovel and a mechanic. To these Dick added a couple of inner tubes and selected some metal objects which turned out later to be sparking-plugs and other oddments.

Our first objective was Touggourt, 218 kilometres away. The Commander-in-Chief of Algeria, General Naulin, started when we did at 8 a.m., but he went by train. This was a little local gadget painted white, that puffed its way noisily, slowly, with great importance, across the vast waste. The General's visit to Touggourt was to be the occasion of great festivities. Normally if there are no mishaps a car gets there before the train. At one point we found ourselves neck and neck. The engine-driver shouted to us encouragingly, and we gestured to him that he had better hurry up. The passengers seemed much entertained by the sight of us. This was not surprising, for we were obviously not travelling along a road at all but simply crossing the desert. The surface was hard and composed of rocky ridges which, even at slow speed, shook us horribly. The *carrosserie* creaked and groaned.

When we got out of the chalk we got into the sand. A great high drift lay across our track as though it had been dumped by innumerable lorries. The obvious thing (I was new to the game) was not to try and climb over it, but to go round it across the smooth shiny surface that sparkled in the sun. The Arab mechanic should have known that the smooth surface was just a snag. Better at all times to go straight at a sand-drift even when it is as high as a

ARAB INTERLUDE

house than circumvent it. Needless to say we stuck as in a bog. The children were maddeningly delighted. They clapped their hands, shouted, and danced for joy. They made plans for the night. They began to collect fuel for a camp-fire. The mechanic, however, seized the fuel—it was just alfa grass—and shoved it under the tyres to make them grip. The revolving wheels merely churned the grass into the sand.

I scanned the horizon for help, but all I saw was a great lake reflected in a glassy sea. I pondered for some time on the mystery of mirage, when the children sighted a caravan.

We hooted and sirened and waved scarves and coats like shipwrecked people. The camels, strung out in a long line, neither stopped nor swerved but continued on their way like mechanical, wound-up things. Nomads, however, came running towards us with guns slung across their shoulders. We solicited the assistance of their camels, but this they refused, for the camels were carrying their women. They were sure that in sufficient numbers they could push the car on to terra firma. There were seventeen of them and it took an hour.

When at last we got back on to the track I handed the Nomad chief a hundred-franc note for distribution. It was gross overpayment, but he turned it over and murmured. The sixteen others began to shout and gesticulate. I quickly put the engine into gear and rushed that dune, with the Nomads rushing after us. It was an exciting and critical moment. The car slowed up and hesitated as it neared the top, but

DESERT NEIGHBOURS

it topped it and slid down the other side at full speed. We carried on without further mishap till sunset. The Renault had a curious predilection for puncturing at sunset. It gave one a chance of course to observe the sky, but it was very irritating and rather anxious-making, especially when on this occasion the mechanic informed me that the *crique* (jack) was out of order. It refused to spiral upward according to plan. He sat down in the sand and proceeded in the half-light to take it to bits. If he were unable to put it together again he assured me we should have to spend the night on the spot.

When light had faded entirely he gave up fiddling. "It's no good, it'll never work again," he said.

"Try it," I urged; and while he fixed it under the axle on a couple of flat stones to prevent it sinking into the sand, I made a little inward prayer:

"Please God MAKE it go right, 'cos it's GOT to." Then I put my hand between the wheel and the sand and felt it rise . . . rise . . . ! When we did get going it seemed like a miracle.

That night I learnt all there was to know about sand. Never again would I hesitate when a mountain arose in my path; instead of slowing-up I learnt on the contrary to accelerate and head straight for it. (This may explain the several cars that Dick at first ran into English stone walls.)

Four hours I fought with sand in the darkness. . . . I understood why General Naulin had preferred to go by train. Touggourt, however, is the terminus of the little local railway; from here onwards even the General would have to go by car.

ARAB INTERLUDE

The Sheikh-el-Arab had given me a letter to his nephew Semail, Caïd of Touggourt; and another to his cousin Hama Serher, Caïd of Hadjira. Semail had been decorated with the Legion of Honour by General Naulin the day before, which made a pretext for a second day of festivities. Hama Serher, who had come from Hadjira for the occasion, fetched us at our hotel and took us to Semail's house. He was chatty and pleasant, with an Irish sense of humour. Before we had known each other many minutes he invited us to stay with him. His house was in an isolated region, half-way between Touggourt and Ouargla. He would not hear of our pushing on to Ouargla without breaking the journey. He would fetch us on the morrow and escort us. We had no option, he said, his word was law in the South and he could have us intercepted and brought to him *becif* (by force).

We found the young, blond, haughty Semail among a group of Arab notabilities in front of his house, where a frightful din was proceeding. A mass of dancing, shouting, excited Berbers with ancient muzzle-loaders were letting off blank charges to the accompaniment of flutes, trumpets, and tom-toms. A hundred years ago they would have been firing at one another, now they had to fire in the air.

Chairs were placed on the sandy space; mint tea (which makes me sick) was served copiously with honey-cakes. Occasionally Arabs and Berbers quarrelled fiercely and the Caïd had to intervene.

When champagne was handed round, the Marabout, sitting next to me, took a glass and ostentatiously

DESERT NEIGHBOURS

emptied the contents in the sand to mark his disapproval of this public defiance of the Prophet's law.

At sunset the Ouled Naïl girls came out to dance, but I suddenly developed fever, and shaking from head to foot was taken away, dosed heavily with aspirin and put to bed. Touggourt was to affect me always in this way within an hour or two of arrival. I recovered the moment Touggourt was out of sight!

Caïd Hama Serher arrived the next morning to escort us to Hadjira. He had a specially made Peugeot with a metal-encased engine to prevent the sand from penetrating. He was that rare thing, an energetic Arab and a sportsman. He suggested that we should go to Timbuctoo. The French military authorities would not allow less than three cars to undertake the trip—one sure if two failed. The Caïd owned two Peugeots, he assured me the track had lately been repaired and that we could be there in eight days. The only complication he admitted was the necessity of carrying petrol for three cars and water for six people. I retorted that if he would place camels at our disposal we would start without hesitation. He laughed; on camel-back the journey would occupy at least half a year.

After we had gone some distance (he had abandoned his Peugeot to my mechanic) he proudly pointed out the changed character of the land: "Biskra is in the Sahara, but the real desert begins **HERE**." It was desert to the horizon on every side; not even a green oasis to break the monotony, endless, undulating, silent space. . . .

ARAB INTERLUDE

The desert affects people in different ways ; some hate it, others fear it, yet others are hypnotised. Little Zora used to laugh and turn head over heels. The shepherd is moved to play a tune on his reed flute. Americans smash up the silence with jazz tunes on a gramophone. I surprised myself praying God to have mercy on my soul!

It was evening when we came to Hadjira, a town dating back to the time when the Berbers attempted to stem the Arab invasion. We did not enter the town, the Caïd explaining that it was uninhabited, a mere shell like a movie set. The only living thing was the oasis, which presented the strange appearance of palm crests bursting straight out of the sand like giant ferns. They were planted in sunk gardens surrounded by high sand-banks to protect them from sand-storms. A few hundred yards from the cubistic town, the Caïd's house—big, white, windowless, and decorated with open-work tracery—stood on a raised terrace, like a wedding-cake on a plate.

I was tired after hours of driving beneath a cloudless sky and longed for a rest and a wash. To my surprise—for the Caïd never warned me—we were received by an American girl whose Western silhouette was disguised beneath a burnous. She showed us our rooms, which had domed ceilings, plaster-panelled walls, and beds covered with home-woven, brightly striped blankets. She left us to rest and sent us—HOT WATER! To such heights of sophistication can an Arab household rise which has had an American as guest for ten weeks.

DESERT NEIGHBOURS

The guest frankly admitted that she had no idea why she stayed so long. The Caïd said he did not know either. Arab hospitality is such that one could of course stay all the rest of one's days. It was quite obvious that the girl belonged to the category of those whom the desert has hypnotised. She could not leave Hadjira except to plunge further and deeper. The Caïd eventually made her a present of a camel (it was his only chance of getting her away) and entrusted her to a couple of reliable Nomads belonging to his tribe. She apparently had no material resources, but so long as she was willing to share with the Nomads their standard of life she could cross the Sahara as an honoured guest. In India I believe similarly one can *BEG* one's way. In Europe or America one has to *WORK* one's way.

We stayed only two nights, but they were more Russian in character than Arab: we spent most part in passionate discussion amid a cloud of smoke. The American girl and I set out to modernise that Caïd. Our ultra-feminist outlook first appalled and then provoked him. He said outrageous things hoping to shock us. His fingers twitched and so did his mouth. East and West metaphorically fought for moral and spiritual supremacy. We argued with the intense conviction of those for whom something vital is at stake, and because the Caïd had to fight two women single-handed he had recourse to the extremest weapons of abuse and coarseness. In the end, sleepy and exhausted, ill-feeling evaporated in a cloud of apologies and laughter.

ARAB INTERLUDE

But the Caïd never forgot. Years after, whenever we met, he would quote fragments of our talk and use it to point a moral or adorn a tale. A little modernism he welcomed, but we two husbandless women who avowed that freedom was a greater thing than love offended his manly consciousness. As for the lure of the desert, in his opinion it was simply laughable. He would have chosen to live anywhere else on earth.

The Caïd's wife was a Ben Gana. She was a sister of "Alfonso," whose two spinster sisters eked out an existence in a dilapidated back-yard. Like all that branch of the family this one too was pale and frail. She was suckling her tenth and only surviving child. As it was a boy the Caïd desperately desired that it should live (its days were quite obviously numbered). In spite of our savage discussion about modernism, he prided himself on his liberalism and would have liked to emancipate his wife a little. But the aristocratic Ben Gana who had condescended to marry a desert cousin did not mean to lose caste ; she would not avail herself of the little bit of slack rope he offered her. Frail and fever-stricken as she was, worn out from child-bearing, desperately lonely in this mid-Saharan house, far from her family and with no companionship other than her slaves, she clung tenaciously to tradition. Nothing would persuade her, for instance, to eat in the presence of her lord. The Caïd deliberately left the room to enable her to swallow a cup of tea, and when he returned too hastily she hid her unfinished cake in the ample folds of her skirt.

DESERT NEIGHBOURS

An outer stairway led up to the roof, but like every Arab house an outer wall precluded all possibility of seeing over the top. The Caïd, however, had constructed another flight of steps up to the outer wall, and there, owing to its width, he would walk by himself. He had tried to persuade his wife to go up there with him, but she feared to lose caste in the eyes of her servants. She had never, he assured me, even had the curiosity to peep over the wall.

CHAPTER XXXVII

The Different Way

WHEN we left Hadjira the Caïd insisted that we should be accompanied by his negro, an ebony-faced devil all swathed in white, capable, he said, of walking four days non-stop to fetch help if we broke down. Dick had complained because the Biskra garagist had lumbered us up with a mechanic, but when we were further lumbered up by the Caïd's negro his protests were vehement. Happily the Caïd did not understand English, though it would have been difficult not to understand Dick's face. The fact was that the Caïd had no faith even in a *modern* woman's motor-driving capacity. He smiled cynically as she drove off light-heartedly with her human load.

It was only 190 kilometres on to Ouargla, but it was a different country. One had a sense of real remoteness. The natives were unspoiled, no one begged, there were no guides. It was evident that tourists were few. The word tourist no longer applied, strangers were travellers, not tourists. We explored the little town by the brightest moon I have ever known. Mysterious white-draped figures, with faces as dark as the shadows, emerged from dark alleys and doorways noiselessly.

In the market-place a group sat round a blazing

THE DIFFERENT WAY

camp-fire. An old hag stretched forth her withered bony arms above the flame which lit up her hungry face. I threw some coin into her lap, and the man squatting by her side told her "It is Allah who has sent it to you."

A horseman rode into the market-place; he was big, broad, and bearded, wrapped in a brown camel-hair burnous. I guessed he was a Caïd, his retainer on a small white horse remained discreetly in the background. The Chief dismounted, saluted, and addressed us in Arabic. He was Adda Ben Yussuf and invited us to his tent. I promised we would go on the morrow. He said he would fetch us, saluted without a smile, and departed into the blue-black darkness of a side-street. It was evident that news of our arrival had penetrated beyond the oasis.

That night we slept at a little inn kept by a real French couple from France. They had drifted there during the War and settled. Doing their best with local products (hens' eggs the size of pigeon eggs, and suckling camel) they gave us the best dinner we had had since we landed in North Africa.

The next morning Caïd Adda was waiting to show us the way to his camp. We bundled the giant with his bulky burnouses into the already overloaded car. Outside the town and beyond the palmery we came to some dunes. A mound was crowned by the largest black tent I have ever seen, a bungalow of a tent. The Caïd indicated that I was to drive up the sand-hill to the entrance of that tent.

With such a car-load the suggestion filled me with dismay, but I set the Renault at it, accelerated full

out, and got there! Negro servants rushed forward and helped us alight. Inside the tent the Caïd's wife was waiting to receive us. She was middle-aged, dramatically beautiful, voluminously draped, barbarically jewelled, positively regal in her dignity. Her half-naked baby crawled about the carpeted floor while she made tea for us. A negro slave squatted a few paces behind, ready to do her bidding.

The carpet we sat on was an immense Djebel Amor, made in the northern mountains. Old oriental carpets formed a partition dividing the tent in two. A European iron bedstead looked absurdly out of place, and next to it a sick baby camel sighed and groaned. The Caïd told us that every month of March he set out on his northward trek. The tribe moved with him, that is to say *three thousand camels*! He invited us to join the Caravan, he would give us camels and a tent, we would feed with the family.

"*Inshallah*," I answered, and he re-echoed, "*Insha'Allah*." It was one of the things I looked forward to, but the years went by, one March succeeded another, and I never managed to get in touch again with Caïd Adda.

I had complained at Hadjira of the condition of the Biskra-Touggourt track, and the Caïd had advised me to return another way: There was a *piste* as he called it, that made a loop round by Oulad Djelal to the west. It was slightly longer, but he assured me it was infinitely better. Having retraced our way to Touggourt, where we spent the night, I asked the Garage to point out the alternative route. The Garage

THE DIFFERENT WAY

had never heard of it nor had the Hotel. Everyone I consulted tried to dissuade me. There was only one way to Biskra they said, and that was the way I had come, parallel with the railway. Our mechanic was especially hostile to the new idea. He maintained that even if the track were good it was terribly remote, and we would meet Nomads. For an Arab to be afraid of Nomads seemed to me so shameful that I decided to take the Caïd's track. I found a small shoeblick who indicated where it began. The military had erected iron posts with red triangles to guide one. For thirty or more kilometres we literally fought our way round about, in and out and over sand-dunes. It was like a world of close-set bunkers. Having started and got well into their midst there was no going back.

The triangle posts had been placed with most careful forethought. Little natural platforms of hard sand enabled one to get a run at the dunes. The Renault would just manage to top them and then slide down the opposite side. It was exciting and anxious driving. I sat straining forward to catch sight of the next post, success depended upon speed, and there was no time for hesitation. The dreaded thing happened, of course: a post had been blown down and I made the mistake again of going *round* instead of *over*. It took us hours to extricate ourselves. We had to collect the sparse scrub and pack it under the wheels, the car then advanced a few inches at a time. It seemed likely that we should never get it out of this sandy region. To get back to Touggourt on foot would have required hours of hard walking ; even the

ARAB INTERLUDE

children realised the seriousness of our situation and tried to be helpful.

After a prolonged agony we found ourselves at last on an excellent track, but the rest of the journey was a nightmare of monotony. All day the landscape maintained its unvaried flat, grey, scrubby character. Only once did we sight gazelle, otherwise no life, monotony without end, hour after hour.

We were all silent—wondering if it would ever, ever end. The problem was how to stay awake at the wheel. When night fell it was a relief not to see the horizon, but after a long day the night seemed equally an eternity. It was a spontaneous shout of relief that went up when we sighted a camp-fire close to the track. I stopped, and Arabs loomed up out of the darkness and surrounded the car. We asked for information and our mechanic embarked upon a discussion in such rapid colloquial Arab that I did not understand. Suddenly he whispered to me in French: "Get away, QUICK!" I waited for no explanation but plunged ahead. I heard them running after us shouting, but we were soon lost to sight and sound. The mechanic vouchsafed no explanation. I knew he was afraid of Nomads and maybe he got a panic without reason, I shall never know. The incident, however, shook me out of my lethargy. I braced myself for the final trial: a long black blot on the landscape was unmistakably an oasis, but there was a wide river-bed to cross and among those boulders in the dark we lost the track. Faced with a steep cliff on the other side we had to retrace our way: we went round in circles, bumped over boulders, crawled

THE DIFFERENT WAY

through deep shingle, round and round, up and down, searching, searching—until we found the continuation of the track. . . .

A guest-house kept by a French stonemason gave us hospitality. I hardly remember anything except three beds in a row, and that I threw myself down without supper and in my clothes. I was awakened by a visit from the Caïd, and because he was a friend, I tidied my hair and went out to greet him. I must have looked strange in spite of my effort, for he apologised and withdrew.

The next morning the Captain of the little garrison informed me that I had failed to comply with the regulations. No car was allowed to start on the Touggourt–Oulad Djelal *piste* without first registering at military headquarters and undergoing mechanical examination to ascertain (a) whether it was in reliable travelling condition; (b) whether it carried sufficient petrol, oil, and water; (c) whether there were provision of food and water in case of a breakdown. Moreover a GUIDE was officially indispensable. I knew nothing of these regulations. Had we broken down or lost our way we had no reserve of food or water, no one knew we had started and no one expected us at our journey's end.

The attitude of the French officer and the faces of the Oulad Djelal Arabs sufficed to impress us. "Allah!" some of them exclaimed, and that was just what I too felt about it. . . .

Biskra was but 90 kilometres further, along a well-frequented track. It was good to get home.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Inheritance!

THE years were passing, and Haafa was evolving into manhood. I noticed that he dolled himself up whenever he had an afternoon off, and stole a little bunch of whatever flowers happened to be in season. It is advisable for an Arab to marry young, but Haafa had no prospect of being able to afford a wedding. Every franc he earned had to keep his mother, his two young brothers, and his sister. Kuder Slimane the Red Beard had done him out of his heritage, a few date palms on a small patch of land, under pretence of "helping" his mother when she was widowed. He had "helped" several other members of his family similarly. Kuder's helping hand was well known. Haafa might have recovered something if he had gone to law, but the uncertainty of the law and the cost of it was hardly worth the risk. I promised Haafa that when my father-in-law died (and he was over eighty) I would make him a present of a wife. It rather appealed to me as cause and effect, that the death of a Dorsetshire fox-hunting squire should result in a line of Arab offspring! Haafa looked forward to the event. Occasionally he asked after the health of "*le vieux*" in England, and Ali the Mason also made plans for the great additions we would make some day to the house. Nevertheless

INHERITANCE!

the news when it came was a surprise. I had forgotten that any Sheridans existed besides the two I had created. It was a strange sensation, after sixteen years struggling to live by my own resources, to know that Dick suddenly owned 11,000 acres in Dorsetshire.

For some time after the arrival of the telegram I was lost in thought: I recalled those short married years before the War when I had dreaded this thing that had come at last to pass. Dreaded the thought of living like my mother-in-law, running a large house, busying myself with tenants, entertaining the clergyman to lunch on Sundays, organising shooting-luncheons in winter and cricket-teas in summer—each detail conjuring up a picture of that normal English country life against which my soul rebelled. In those days when life was so secure it all seemed so pre-planned, so inevitable, the future was like a map unrolled. Before I was even a mother I visualised myself a grandmother, sitting opposite a silver-haired partner by the fireside!

How differently it had all worked out. Instead, I was living an exotic African life, exerting my resourcefulness upon an Arab village in lieu of the English one! (Human caprice manifest in all its absurdity.) The presence of Haafa was a reminder of the responsibilities one assumes when they are not thrust upon one.

Haafa looked at me with a mixture of decent sympathy, but I could see mirrored in his eyes the bride who was to be more beautiful than all the houris of the thousand and one nights.

ARAB INTERLUDE

He was half-fearful—Ali the Mason too, Nasser, and El Hadj—lest we should never return. Rumours spread like wildfire through the town that our Biskra property was for sale. A Maltese garagist said he meant to acquire it, to exploit as a *café-dansant*. Abdellah arrived in all anxiety to get reliable news for “the family.”

The month was March, the year 1931. I swore we would return, that my heart was in Biskra, that I could not live without sun, that Dick would pursue his studies at Algiers. I denied that Margaret would marry an Englishman; were we not all totally unfitted for English life. . . .?

There were tears in the eyes of our Arabs assembled round the gate to see us depart.

As we motored through Biskra town to the station, Piedro, the Italian pastrycook, rushed out of his shop and signalled to me to stop. As I slowed up he jumped on to the running-board and asked if I would not like to sell my car? He offered me five thousand francs. (Five thousand! And how many rivers had it forded, how many dunes?) Then as we slowly passed by the café, Salan, magnificent in a new embroidered burnous, hurriedly left his table and climbed on to the opposite running-board: Was Piedro trying to buy my car? He guessed as much. Piedro had often voiced a desire, but he (Salan) wanted it too. As I was a friend of “the family” he deserved first consideration. Piedro cunningly offered ready money, he would fetch his five thousand right away and bring them to the train. Salan offered three thousand down and a further four thousand in instalments.

INHERITANCE!

I clinched with Pedro. Salan was furious: "You don't trust my word?"

"In business," I reminded him, "there must be no sentiment."

"Alfonso," Abdellah, and Agha Afssa—all the Ben Gana family in fact—were at the train. Haafa, Nasser, and Ali the Mason had taken a short-cut on foot and got there before us. Pedro came hurrying at the last moment with five thousand francs in 100-franc notes that had to be counted and receipted. The train was moving when I handed Haafa two thousand francs "to start negotiations" for a bride.

There was a terrible air of finality about our departure.

We returned faithfully in October not one whit the richer. Everyone knows the time it takes to realise an estate. Happily Haafa was not yet accommodated with a bride, so we had a breathing space. The Biskra world was surprised to see us back and Ali the Mason put up all his prices.

The studio at the end of the garden had now become the centre of my building fervour. As a studio it had long been useless. In winter it was cold; there was no fireplace, electric wiring, or gas, and therefore not much chance of warming it. The skylight admitted more sun than was compatible with modelling, and when it rained it leaked. Nothing that Ali could do would prevent it leaking. In the heat plasticine turned to sauce in my hands. Clay that was brought on camel-back two days' trek from the South dried into fine powder. Even if conditions had been

ARAB INTERLUDE

favourable there was not much chance of models: the Prophet, intent on stamping out idolatry, ordained that no human image should be wrought that cast a shadow. My ambition would have been to secure one of the magnificent Senegalese soldiers, but I foresaw the face of the French Commandant if I asked him to supply me with one, the face of the Senegalese if I should succeed in making him understand that I desired him without uniform, and the comment of the town if either application were successful.

The studio, therefore, was only a studio inasmuch as it harboured Lenin and Birkenhead, each on a pedestal. It was otherwise a gigantic reception-room in which we had several successful parties. Then one day I conceived the idea of adding a small domed room with windows facing east and south. It seemed a little thing, but even a little thing became great when Ali the Mason embarked upon it. To that room I added a dressing-room. A bathroom then became essential, and so the studio grew into a second house: it was a better house than the first, for I had learnt through years of mistakes to be an architect, and Ali had learnt to be a better mason.

And so building went on: workmen filled the garden, Ali still badgered me for money and designs, cement sacks were lost as ever, and I continued to be hard up, anxious and bothered.

The essential, however, was to keep one's word to Haafa. I had promised him a wife, and a wife he should have. He confided to Margaret that he would only marry a girl of her choosing. Haafa was quite

INHERITANCE!

a personality in the village. Not only was he a Slimane, which in itself was commendable (though goodness knows why, for there were Slimanes and Slimanes), but also because he had grown into a very straight, extremely reliable young man. He was an exemplary son and brother. He was the trusted servitor as well as friend of the "*Inglesia's*." His job seemed to be a permanent one, since in our prosperity we *had* returned to Biskra! The offers of brides were not lacking, it was rather an embarrassment of choice. Haafa's mother was now a person to be considered, and was treated as such at all the weddings. It was evident that no matter what Haafa said, she at all events was not going to accept blindly Margaret's or my choice. As the two women would be shut up together to the end of one or the other's days I could hardly blame her. I never did blame Haafa's mother for anything except for tying her head up with all the old remnants and faded ribbons Haafa rescued from the waste-basket. A rag-bag was what appropriately described her. Their house instead of being clean, empty, well swept—in fact the simple Arab interior—was full to overflowing with all the old cream-pots and bottles that could no longer be contained in our kitchen dresser. Old cast-off European clothes hung on a line and formed a screen for Lazhari's plank bed. That bed was piled with all the other accumulations that I had long forgotten. A mattress had been thrown away because the dog had torn it open or the mice had made their nests in it. Pictures out of old magazines covered the walls (some of them upside down). Broken jugs and leaking

ARAB INTERLUDE

kettles, lamps that never would burn again, a wicker garden-chair that had no bottom . . . there was simply no end to the treasures, or the dust. And yet deep down in his soul Haafa knew better. This was evident from the character of a room he was preparing for his wife. It had a door that locked and he carried the key on him. Not even his mother dared to enter uninvited.

He had asked me to give him as a wedding present tiles for his floor. These were modern, Rodari's best. There was furniture in the room, a big iron double bed, a painted wardrobe, a table with a looking-glass, a shelf with a vase of flowers, photographs in frames of myself, Margaret, and Dick, but there was no untidy accumulation. It was a well-ordered, neat, cosy, European room, with curtained windows giving on to a garden in which he had planted cabbages, carrots, geraniums, and marigolds. How surprised she would be, that Arab bride!

Haafa was desperately proud of his room. Lazhari was proud of it too for him. His mother's attitude was . . . well, very much the same as mine towards Dick—(widowed mothers of sons are perhaps all alike?)—a kind of pathetic pride, adoration, belief. Haafa's attitude to his mother was . . . well, much the same as Dick's to me: affectionate, patronising, protective. . . .

Once she held my two hands in hers and said: "You are still young . . . why do you not take a husband?"

"And you . . .?" I suggested.

She glanced at Haafa and wistfully shook her head, and I shook mine. We understood.

CHAPTER XXXIX

Selecting a Wife

MARGARET'S choice of a wife for Haafa fell upon Jasmina. She was the daughter of a neighbour who grew vegetables for the market. The friendship had a curious origin: At a wedding one night Margaret became aware of a small boy who stared at her so fixedly that she finally became annoyed. The child explained: "I shall be blind soon and I want to remember you."

It appeared that his diseased eyes were being treated by the Taleb, who was regarded as holy by the superstitious. The Taleb for a sum of money made up a talisman that kept off the evil eye. Every man, woman, and child wore a talisman on a cord round the neck, several if they could afford it. The talisman consisted of a verse of the Koran folded small and sewn into a leather wallet. The Taleb prescribed ointments, too, and medicines, but there were old women specialists for whom the denomination of witch would have been more appropriate. The Taleb and the old witch were right when they prophesied that Milud would go blind. They were doing everything between them to make him so. Margaret took him in hand, confident that her common sense and hygienic methods would prevail. She doctored him every day for weeks. It became a

ARAB INTERLUDE

moral fight between herself and the Taleb. The boy's mother was dead, his father was superstitious, he believed in talismans, but Milud believed in Margaret. When at last his blindness was definitely averted the father said it was the Taleb, and the Taleb acknowledged the will of merciful Allah. At all events, a friendship resulted between Margaret and Milud's sister. Jasmina was beautiful according to European standards. I was not sure if she would appeal to Haafa. I found her essentially decorative, always dressed in magenta and orange. Her violet eyes with immensely long lashes were full of mischief. She loved coming to our house. Her father, who adored her, let her come as often as she liked, escorted by Milud.

I thought she came too often, her visits were disturbing. Haafa had to be excluded from the house and Nasser from the garden. She liked walking about the place. It was all the outdoor she was ever likely to know and more than she ever had hoped to. She had none of the apprehension of the well-brought-up Arab girl. Her wandering eyes seemed to be searching restlessly. One felt she would have welcomed a situation that was not quite regular. I had to restrain her forcibly from opening the big garden door and peeping into the road. There was a café beyond, crowds of villagers on rush mats sat there smoking and playing dominoes. If it became known that an Arab woman visiting us had not been guarded with due respect for Moslem proprieties, none of our friends would ever have been allowed to visit us again. But Jasmina thought it a grand joke. She laughed as she wrestled with me for the door handle.



Author and the studio building

ARAB INTERLUDE

of magic: One night Jasmina sent us word that she had cooked a dinner for us. I accepted the dinner, but on Haafa's advice nobody ate it. Haafa was on the look-out against spells, of which he knew something. A friend of his who had two wives had died from repeated love-potions in his food. There was still talk in the village of one whose name had been written on a piece of paper and sewn up inside a frog's mouth. When the frog died the person whose name was inscribed on the paper died also.

For some days neither Margaret nor I were at all well. We had unaccountable cramps and dragged ourselves about the garden miserably. Haafa spent money on protecting talismans and went without food.

Then odd things happened: Objects in Margaret's room began to change place. One morning she awoke to find various of her belongings lying about her bed.

While I was reading, a Persian bowl on the table next to me fell to the ground and smashed. There was no possibility of its falling without having been pushed. A few minutes later a dish full of Arab cakes that Jasmina had sent us came crashing from a shelf, and that same evening we picked up books from the floor. It was as though a devil were let loose in the room. It was their last desperate attempt to force our attention. After a few days, seeing that their efforts made no impression, they gave it up. Probably they found the Taleb's services too expensive.

I was awfully sorry for Jasmina and vowed that I never again would be drawn into marriage negotiations.

SELECTING A WIFE

Two years later she married a middle-aged man who had a wife.

Haafa too is married. I shall never forget the first time I saw the girl, Haafa having begged me to verify the reports of her beauty.

The family received me with great ceremony and it was some time before the prospective bride appeared. The central room of the house was large as usual, and the earthen walls were a perfect background for the colourful groups of women. A stairway devoid of balustrade led up to the roof, sunlight streamed through the opening.

Suddenly the jingling of anklets and a hush in the conversation made me look up: Dressed in stiff gala clothes, turbaned in gold and coral, her white mask-like face flood-lit by the streaming sunbeam from above, the girl sedately descended that stairway. It was like a set-piece in a play, and the staging was perfect. She was fairer skinned than many a Scandinavian, and in every way fulfilled the dream that Haafa had treasured in his heart so many years.

The marriage is a great success and they have a son.

CHAPTER XL

The Timid Bridegroom

OUR efforts in finding a wife for Haafa aroused unrest in the other members of our household. One of them proposed to Saulea, he was earning good money and had something to offer. In fact, whoever worked for us was regarded in the light of a *parti*. Needless to say Saulea refused, and quite ungraciously.

At the same time, the other (I purposely do not mention either name or occupation) agreed with his brother upon the terms of a loan, and instructed his mother to set about finding him a wife.

The mother was infirm and never attended weddings; she therefore had no idea which were the available brides. She sent for Fatma, the negress whose profession was to carry brides into the nuptial chamber. Personally I never liked Fatma; she was Saulea's rival and had none of Saulea's qualities. I had misgivings when I heard that Fatma had been entrusted with this delicate mission. As soon as the marriage was arranged the prospective husband was so overwhelmed with shyness that he blushed whenever he met me. Haafa also did not trust Fatma's choice, and thought the bridegroom was a fool not to ask me to go and see the bride and report.

The night of the wedding the village assembled in our yard and were served with the usual *cous-cous*. All

THE TIMID BRIDEGROOM

our lamps were requisitioned, it was a brilliant affair! Margaret and I were honoured with the invitation to see the bride after the marriage consummation.

We waited for some time, and then as nothing happened we went home.

I was not waked that night by the customary gunshot. At breakfast the next morning Haafa was bursting with information he dared not impart. Saulea soon arrived and it was clear that she knew all the details. It appeared that the timid bridegroom was not satisfied that his wife was a virgin. According to law he had the right to send her back to her parents, retaining her trousseau and her jewels. This had happened quite recently in the town, a man had thrown his bride stark naked back into the arms of her mother for that very reason. Such a line of conduct is only permissible if it is done at once, but our retainer waited until dawn. His excuse was that in the dark he could not be sure.

Daylight reserved further revelations for him: His bride was a half-caste (Fatma had as usual been bribed to arrange the marriage). The bridegroom swore he would not keep her; but his mother-in-law, a large menacing woman, threatened to sue him for defamation of her daughter's character (the scandal of it!), and meanwhile removed all the wedding jewellery to her own house. It was the loss of this jewellery that finally settled the matter. It had cost the bridegroom nearly the whole sum that he had borrowed from his brother. He never would be able to afford any more, and could, therefore, never marry again.

ARAB INTERLUDE

There were endless arguments and discussions. Mother-in-law insisted for the vindication of the family's honour that her daughter should be examined by the Arab doctor. The bridegroom refused, declaring that the doctor had been bribed. Instead, he called in the French doctor. The Frenchman was also a diplomatist. He declared the bride HAD been a virgin, but that "one cannot always tell. Sometimes it happens like that."

On the fifth day we went to the bride's reception and saw her for the first time. She had not left the nuptial chamber, although her husband had not been near her since the first night. She was dark-skinned and unabashed. Next to her sat her voluminous and terrifying mother. In the outer room the bridegroom's old mother sat huddled up in a shawl, groaning with misery, while her daughter talked openly and loud about "the harlot" who was her brother's wife.

It is usual for the household to cook the bride's food during the honeymoon period, but this bride and her mother had to cook for themselves. The outlook was bright for peace in the home!

Nine months later, as she gave birth to a son, much was forgiven her, and as the jewels were never forthcoming the only sensible thing to do was to make the best of a bad bargain.

CHAPTER XLI

Gardens of Allah

A HOUSE can be an irritating thing when one has designed it oneself. Like a piece of sculpture that is not quite right its faults leave one no peace. I longed to tear down mine and build it again. As I could not afford to do so I sought solace in the garden. Whatever went wrong there was God's fault, not mine.

There are some blessed things about an African garden: weeds do not grow because nothing grows without encouragement, but *with* encouragement things grow almost while you wait.

In the spring, after a day's watering, I toured the garden in the evening to see how it had grown since the morning. In a corner sheltered from sirocco I had my nursery. These were seedlings grown from packets sent from England. Stock, antirrhinums, wallflower, marigolds. Nasser scanned the bed daily with an eye like a robin. When he had detected a germinating seed he would fetch me from the other end of the garden to tell me, "I have found SOMETHING!" That almost invisible "something" became a weedy seedling in less than no time. In another bed the first anemones were shooting up their bent heads. Geraniums grew into trees, and had to be dusted with a feather duster after a sand-storm. There was a "free-growing" (I believe that is the gardening

ARAB INTERLUDE

expression), grey, feathery shrub locally known as "ABSINTHE." I don't believe that is its real name nor that it is anything but ordinary. However, I have not yet found it in any English garden, and if I ever do I know I shall fall on my knees and embrace it. Like a willow, it had that great quality of sprouting if you stuck any stick of it into the earth. It was invaluable for borders, the only trouble being that one had continually to cut it back. It could be trimmed into neat hedges, or left to spread its silvery fronds under the trees where nothing else would grow. I planted it round the top of my sunk garden and it formed an almost opaque hedge. It never disappointed, it never failed.

When "Alfonso" asked me to make a garden for him, I planted an avenue of cuttings which provoked his irony. In a very short time, however, he was proudly showing it off and presenting cuttings in turn to his friends!

In a year I had made quite a nice garden for "Alfonso." I gave him geranium cuttings (in bloom!) and some of my best bougainvillias. Cannas helped to fill up his vast irrigated squares. Whenever I arrived a regiment of retainers automatically assembled. They brought me *sécateurs* that would not cut, a spade with a broken handle that tore the palm of my hand, a watering-pot that leaked, but a great deal of good-will. My every request was fulfilled at the trot. There was a "guardian" who took more than ordinary interest. He nursed the garden through a summer so that when we all returned in the autumn it was ablaze with yellow chrysanth-

GARDENS OF ALLAH

inums. "Alfonso" was as proud and delighted as a child. All the other Ben Ganas were jealous. He had a large, round, cement platform built in the middle of a flower-bed, and there on carpeted mattresses he reclined at ease and drank coffee with his friends. Agha Aïssa was exquisitely in the picture, elegant and leisurely; he watched me while I worked, and made occasional pathetic attempts to look as if he were helping. He was one of those people for whom everybody was ready to do something although he never expressed either thanks or appreciation.

I began to entertain serious hopes of the "Alfonso"-Aïssa garden. In the midst of my flowers their tangerine trees loaded the air with scent. Figs, bougainvillia, and apricots formed a pleasant background. Sheikhs from the South came and invoked Allah's blessings and complimented the Ben Gana uncle and nephew on their gardening prowess. The result was that the guardian (*alias* gardener) was offered a living wage to go elsewhere. The man had never been paid anything in his life except in grain and cigarettes. He had never contemplated the possibility of earning MONEY! The offer came during the following summer when everyone was away. "Alfonso" returned that year to find a withered, sun-baked garden. No one had thought of watering it after the responsible man had left. Aïssa smiled sadly and said it was a pity. "Alfonso" called the man a *halouf* and said he would break his head if ever he saw him, and that was the end of THAT garden.

Ali complained that I had made a garden for his

ARAB INTERLUDE

cousins and not for him. He was childishy insistent. His garden was in the centre of the town, spacious and well irrigated. The *segua* serpentined across it. Protected by high walls from sirocco and north winds, anything could grow.

One day my writing was interrupted by the arrival of his servant. He had been sent, he said, to fetch FLOWERS for Si Ali's garden. "FLOWERS WITH ROOTS! ROOTS WITH FLOWERS!"

I promised to send or bring them. The man said he must have them at once, and sat down under a palm tree with an air of finality to wait. Rather than argue in Arabic, I collected the plants: geranium cuttings especially, for they satisfied the Arab craving for plants in flower. I devastated my nursery of seedlings; I dug up a fruit tree and violets. The man departed with a load, and a grunt like a camel.

In the evening I went to Ali's house to see how he had planted the things. They were not planted, they were wilting in the basket.

"We were waiting for you," he said, and got up with an effort from the rush mat under a tree.

"Bring me a trowel," I said resignedly.

They brought me coffee and honey-cakes. A trowel was unknown, but someone sharpened a thick stick and offered to make holes for me. Ali summoned his servants. They stood and he stood, watching me sort the seedlings from among the tangled heap. Then I got down on my knees and with a small stick scratched the light earth. A woman ON HER KNEES working filled them with dismay. They did not like to get

GARDENS OF ALLAH

down on their own knees (except to pray), the small things I was planting were utterly beneath a MAN'S notice, and yet they felt, everyone of them, that something ought to be done.

Ali, dressed in dove colour with shoes and socks to match, could bear almost anything except effort. He exhorted his servants -

"Help Madame! Can't you see she needs help? How can you all stand there doing nothing?"

They went on standing, and some smiled. Nothing that Ali said to his servants could possibly have any effect. Rich he might be (and his father and grandfather before him), but he treated them too familiarly in private life; they had accompanied him on too many night adventures; they had witnessed too many love-affairs with European women, and heard the things he said of those women when it was over. . . .

Gathering his dove-coloured cloth burnous into one hand, Ali stepped into the midst of the earth patch and bending down held a wallflower between forefinger and thumb while I pressed it into the soil. This example inspired his retainers as no exhortation could have done. He was able to step back into the shade and watch, while a bearded old man picked out a seedling and handed it to the negro chauffeur who dug a hole with a stick, while Ali's personal attendant held it as Ali had, and I planted it. A lad followed with a terra-cotta pot and drowned each.

When it was all over they swore, every one of them, by the Holy Prophet and Si Abdel Kader, that they would keep the plants watered.

Ali expressed considerable gratitude. There was a

ARAB INTERLUDE

window from which his wife would be able to see the flowers when they bloomed.

Those that bloomed before the summer, however, were the only ones. No one watered them during the ensuing months, and when Ali returned in the autumn from the Tell he was disappointed to find there were no chrysanthemums. The only things that survived were the grey absinthe bushes that had grown long and straggly.

When after that the Sheikh-el-Arab asked me to make a garden for him I promised, but it was an Arab promise. . . .

CHAPTER XLII

"*Alfonso's*" Brides

IT must have been the year my father-in-law died and we FELT rich (which is as good as the real thing). I sent for a crate of bulbs from Holland. If I remember right it cost me fifteen pounds.

Nasser was appalled as I unpacked bag after bag of "onions"! We planted till we were sick. Day after day we stooped over those flower-beds which, for irrigation purposes, were considerably lower than the paths. Onions! More onions! So many onions! Nasser groaned as he bent to it, and I groaned as I straightened myself.

But when the onions flowered, Nasser—and Haafa too—said that Allah had blessed the garden. I was considered rather a friend of Allah's—He favoured me. Everything I planted brought forth a blossom. Daffodils in all variety followed by hyacinths, christened "flowers of Paradise." Haafa went down on his knees to smell them. Nasser squatted before them as though he were praying. Even the insolent Lazhari was moved to exclaim: "*Acarabi! C'est beaucoup bon!*"

Darwins in the sunlight were the final triumph. Children born that month could say they were born the year of the tulips! The Sheikh-el-Arab came to see them and asked me to order some for him.

ARAB INTERLUDE

Everyone wanted tulips and no one would understand they were very expensive.

"Alfonso" was going to be married. There would be celebrations lasting over a week and he wished to entertain his guests in his garden. He begged me to produce flowers for the occasion, as if magic were in my power.

There was just time to throw down stock seed indiscriminately and hope it would flower at the psychological moment. It did! "Alfonso's" wedding garden was simply a purple perfumed mist. He fixed up electric lights and flood-lit it. The effect was all that he had hoped, and he was very proud and pleased.

There were carpets, cushions, and refreshments under a spacious tent; somewhere among the trees Arab musicians played fiddle and flute and sang nasal love-songs. Margaret as usual attended in Arab dress.

One night Lahla the Guide asked permission for three distinguished French ladies to attend the Feast. They were staying at the Transatlantique Hotel and were *really* distinguished, he said; *Comtesses* in fact!

It was decided among us that "Alfonso" would introduce Margaret as his fiancée. The rest of the Ben Gana relations, retainers, etc., promised to play up. Such is the ignorance of Europeans concerning Arab customs, one could count on the French ladies being completely taken in.

The *Comtesse* was accompanied by her daughter and a girl friend. They were extremely chic, dressed

"ALFONSO'S" BRIDES

in immaculate white demi-toilettes, hair perfectly waved, hats at the inimitable Paris angle, etc., extremely gracious women of the world. "Alfonso" was delighted with them, he courteously answered their innumerable queries concerning Arab marriage. When the inevitable request was made to see the bride he hesitated: "She never sees people, she is VERY shy . . . I'm afraid you will not be able to induce her to speak. . . ." The ladies quite understood: "but let us only LOOK at her," they implored.

The stage was all set: "Alfonso" got up and went to the tent. A few minutes later he emerged, solemnly leading Margaret by the hand. There was a tense silence, and I confess the picture of the two against the background of misty flowers and tall flood-lit palms robbed even the Arabs of any inclination to laugh. The musicians piped a plaintive love-song and Margaret, resplendent in "myosotis" blue and gold, richly turbaned and diademed with real diamonds, drew her spangled veil half-across her face. The natural gesture of an Arab girl is to hide her mouth. If she cannot veil her face she will hold her hand to her mouth and droop her head. Margaret played her part to perfection. No actress who had rehearsed the part could have been more convincing.

"Alfonso," in a primrose burnous and suit of primrose silk, leaned towards her and whispered reassuring words! With eyes downcast she allowed herself to be led up the garden path, and it was not until they stood before the guests that she slowly, timidly dared to raise her black Irish eyes! There was a murmur of admiration. The *Comtesse* expressed

ARAB INTERLUDE

sincere good wishes for their happiness and invited the bride to be seated by her.

Affecting to understand only a few words of French, Margaret answered in monosyllables, half-frightened, looking furtively towards her fiancé for approval. The French ladies were enchanted. They had never dreamed, they said, that such a romantic privilege awaited them. . . . It was an unforgettable night—they would carry the memory of it with them always . . . they hoped (and here the *Comtesse* dropped her voice and turned to "Alfonso") he would be good to her, cherish her always. . . . It was "Alfonso's" turn to look shy and stare at his white suède feet. The *Comtesse* expressed a wish to send the bride a wedding present from Paris and consulted Margaret's taste. Margaret turned a bewildered face to "Alfonso," who, with real Arab understanding, suggested a *flacon de parfum*, to which Margaret smiled timid approval. The *Comtesse* promised, "It shall be the largest bottle and the best that Chanel can produce."

They departed with heartfelt compliments and thanks. It had all been a tremendous success. Everyone had played their part, our Arab friends said they had never known such good entertainment. One felt, too, that the French ladies had enjoyed it all as much as we had. If we felt guilty of having fooled them we comforted ourselves that their ignorance deserved it.

"Alfonso," however, had a cousin who was an officer on leave from Morocco, the same who had left his English thoroughbred horse in our care the year before. He had been deputed to bring the ladies

"ALFONSO'S" BRIDES

from their hotel and to escort them back. With a desire to make himself interesting and to dramatise the farce he undertook to reveal the truth to its victims. It was very unnecessary, and when we heard that the ladies were angry we blamed the blundering fool.

Any Arab girl, even though she were not the bride, would have been tolerable; a French girl masquerading would have been bad enough; but an English girl . . . was enough to provoke war between the two countries!

Two days later the wedding took place. As the bride was from the Sheikh-el-Arab's house it was a tremendous affair. The whole town was in a fever of excitement. Crowds lined the wide road between the two houses from morning till night—dancing, firing blank charges, and beating tom-toms. The hour of the bride's arrival was kept a secret. Unlike the village weddings where the bride is actually brought to her husband's house at midnight, this bride was to arrive some time during the day, hold a reception in the wedding chamber, and receive the bridegroom quietly in the night.

It was a great day for the Ben Gana ladies. They arrived at "Alfonso's" house in curtained cars. It was on this occasion that the Sheikh-el-Arab did Ali the honour of sending his wife in person to fetch Ali's wife to the feast, and he refused to let her go.

The secrecy concerning the transfer of the bride was such that one would have imagined all the world was intent on kidnapping her. A closely curtained

ARAB INTERLUDE

car escorted by outriders and tribesmen brandishing guns galloped into the bridegroom's courtyard. Everyone pressed round, a way was cleared, and . . . a negro servant stepped out! When eventually the bride did arrive she came unheralded and unexpected.

"Alfonso's" shabby courtyard had all been cleaned up and whitewashed. A plaster-moulder had worked for weeks in his bedroom, setting up plaster columns and carved archways that would have delighted a movie studio. His sisters, like "frogs that out of damp corners creep!" were all decked out. There was animation, laughter, and shouting. The bride, enthroned on a high seat, sat motionless in stiff rich robes, her head erect, her eyes cast down, her spangled veil held half across her face hiding her mouth. She neither spoke nor moved. I was reminded of a wax jewelled Madonna carried in Spanish processions.

She was a sweet woman, intelligent, educated, and destined to be extremely unhappy. From the Sheikh-el-Arab's large entertaining household of three hundred female inmates to "Alfonso's" small dismal quarters with two bitter spinsters for company was a retrogressive step. She suffered from loneliness and homesickness. Accustomed to a higher standard of life she tried to raise "Alfonso's" household, and the sisters revolted, accusing her of being uppish and superior. As the weeks and the months passed and there was no sign of a baby, the sisters-in-law insulted her. "Alfonso" knew little of this, he went out in the morning and returned only at night. His wife knew better than to welcome him with complaints.

“ALFONSO’S” BRIDES

He never knew that she spent her days in tears, that she no longer left her dark room even to take air in the courtyard. She was a loyal wife and loved her husband as one needs must love the only man one is ever going to see in one's life, but she longed to be sent back to the house whence she had been taken.

CHAPTER XLIII

"Baby's" Narrow Escape

AS the weeks went by and "Baby" no longer came to see us I began to feel anxious. He had not been seen in the town either, and I wondered if he had got into trouble. His visit to the South of France had changed him; he had become reckless, extravagant, and sophisticated. Remembering the visit of his mother some months earlier, I felt a sort of responsibility. If advice could do any good I meant to advise him, urge upon him discretion and prudence, and for the sake of his family, economy.

I left word in town, in case he turned up, that I wanted to see him.

Margaret brought him in one evening. She had met him riding up from the South.

"What have you been doing?" I asked. "Why have you been away so long?"

He chuckled self-consciously: "I've been in Seriana."

"All this time?"

He nodded.

"Have you business in Seriana?"

He laughed: "I was very busy."

We dined under the olive tree, by the light of a lamp hanging from a branch. Afterwards, as he lay among the cushions staring up into the intricate tracery, I got him to tell me the story.

"BABY'S" NARROW ESCAPE

It was a narrow escape, he said, the narrowest he had yet experienced.

"You know my mother wants me to marry . . .?"

"I know."

"How do you know . . .?"

"Well—eh—because she's a sensible woman, and she knows that if you don't marry you're bound to get into trouble."

"My mother selected the girl before . . . before I went to France."

"And you refused?"

"I did not refuse, I hesitated. . . ."

Apparently while "Baby" hesitated the girl's father gave her to the highest bidder, who was Twati Ben Asfar, the richest man, the only rich man, in Seriana. He owned a large shop, the only shop. He offered three thousand francs down for Attra, instead of the customary fifteen hundred in instalments. Unfortunately, Attra had caught sight of "Baby" once from her father's roof-top. From the indispensable local negress she learnt that "Baby's" mother desired her as a daughter-in-law. Attra had fallen in love, Arab fashion, at first sight. But her father never mentioned the young man as a suitor, and Attra cried a great deal when she was married to Twati, whose eyes looked in opposite directions.

Owing to this disfiguration Twati had a twist in his nature. He was nicknamed "El Hams" on account of his insane jealousy. He forbade Attra ever to go on to the roof, for fear a passer-by should chance to look up, or into the garden because the wall was only six metres high.

ARAB INTERLUDE

Their bedroom was on the ground floor, dark and roomy, built for summer heat. The only other occupants of the house were Twati's old mother and a little orphan nephew, Larbi, whom Twati had adopted because his father was dead and his mother had married again.

These details "Baby" learnt from the negress, who encouraged him to go to Seriana and try his luck, whispering subtly, "She loves you, Sidi ¹!"

Attra had only been married a month, but that was time enough to win over the boy Larbi. "Baby," too, made friends with Larbi. In the café the child came and sat by him, knowing that he kept marbles in his pocket, and "Baby" waited in patience, assured by the negress that Attra would send him a message.

Then one day Larbi, with a mischievous twinkle, whispered: "The little door in the garden wall is unlocked."

Urgent business had obliged Twati to spend a night in town. The road was deserted, the village all asleep, when "Baby" pushed open the garden door. The watch-dog had been drugged with hashish, and mother-in-law too slept soundly. There was a little rustle of silk, a muffled jangle of bracelets—Attra without a word emerged from the shadow, took "Baby" by the hand and led him into the house.

In her bedroom Attra lit a candle. By the flickering light "Baby" beheld the girl for the first time who should have been his wife. She was very pale, very

¹ Sidi interpreted is "Sir."

"BABY'S" NARROW ESCAPE

frail, with huge dilated eyes. With a sudden gesture he snuffed the candle and took her in his arms.

He went back the next night, and thereafter whenever Twati was out of the way. Once, in despair at not having seen him for a week, Attra gave him assignation on the roof-top while Twati slept believing she was at his side. She was recklessly in love, and "Baby" was lured by adventure.

It was danger that bound him to her.

The day came when Twati was summoned North on business, to Constantine. He was to be absent a week. During his absence he appointed his conscientious brother Daha as guardian.

That night "Baby" slipped through the garden door taking care to lock it behind him. His black burnous was the colour of the night, the hood as usual was pulled low over his face. He knew his way now across the garden, and that Attra awaited him in her room. Before her door, however, he fell over the sleeping form of Daha. In a second both were on their feet. "Baby" raced across the garden, and Daha in hot pursuit fired his revolver at random. There was not time to unlock the garden door, so "Baby" climbed the palm tree that drooped its head over the wall and like a tiger-cat dropped silently into the street. Daha, of course, did not follow him over the wall for fear of making public the dishonour of the family.

Attrra hearing the shots had rushed to a window in

ARAB INTERLUDE

time to see her lover leap from the garden wall. She waited breathlessly for her mother-in-law to inquire what all the noise was about. Nothing, however, could disturb her sound slumber. Nevertheless Attra was paralysed with fear. She knew that Daha would tell her husband. Another might be satisfied with divorce, but Twati . . . She knew his jealousy and shuddered. . . . She went to the little window and leaned her burning forehead against the cold iron bars—the end—the end—throbbed through her brain.

There was a slight stir below her window, Daha was crouching in the shadow, his ear to the wall, listening . . . in case Attra's lover might return another way. Daha was taking no risks, he had the honour of the family at heart. . . .

Attra's brain worked quickly. She crept to her mother-in-law's room and shook her till she awoke:

"Mother of Twati, come to my room and see the shameful thing that is being done to our family! Below my window crouches my Uncle Daha like a jackal that prowls by night. . . . He is waiting for a sign from me to come!"

And as the old woman remained uncomprehending, Attra took her by the arm and dragged her: "Come and see for yourself this evil thing!"

Mumbling and muttering the old woman followed Attra to her room and saw Daha hiding in the shadow below the window. Thrusting her head between the bars she shouted:

"O pig, son of a pig, what are you doing looking up at the window of your brother's wife? Away with

you, and the maledictions of Allah be upon you for all time, till the day of your death!’”

Attra watched Daha slink away like a whipped dog and laughed silently to herself. . . .

The stars were paling in the eastern sky, and from the mosque the Muezzin was calling the faithful to the prayer of dawn. “Baby” went to the mosque and bowed his forehead to the ground, invoking the mercy of Allah upon the woman who loved him.

Sunrise found a very agitated Daha sitting astride a very small donkey going as fast as its thin legs would carry it, in the direction of the station. A red cotton handkerchief was full of provisions, for he intended to wait for Twati’s train and tell his story before the women told theirs. . . . For three days and three nights Daha never left the station for fear of missing a train. On the fourth day Twati arrived. As they rode back to Seriana Daha blurted out his story and Twati listened in silence, weighing in his suspicious mind his brother’s possible guilt.

When he reached his house Daha squatted down in the dust at the door and Twati went in alone. Attra rose from her loom when he entered and came forward smilingly to greet him: “Praised be God that you have returned in safety and good health, ya Sidi!” And he answered: “The benediction of Allah upon you, and upon this house.” Then she said, lowering her eyes. “Sidi, an evil thing has occurred in your absence.” But he only grunted, “Make me some coffee,” and squatting in a corner of the room started telling his prayer beads.

When the coffee was made, Attra sat down next to

ARAB INTERLUDE

him and began her story. She spoke haltingly at first, appalled by the magnitude of her lies, intimidated by the man whose hard eyes seemed to search out her heart. Twati's old mother corroborated all her daughter-in-law said, but Twati still spoke not a word, torn with doubts and racked with suspicion. He sat cross-legged on the mat, telling his beads one by one with slow precision. Attra, vaguely disquieted by his prolonged silence, went back to her loom. . . .

Two days later Twati divorced Attra according to Muslim form, before three witnesses and the Kadi, his reason being that if his brother's story were true he would have had to kill her, and that if his wife's story were true he would have had to kill his brother. As he could not be sure of one or the other the only alternative was divorce. At the same time he dismissed his brother from his presence with the recommendation that he should never see his face again.

"Baby" relapsed into silence with the usual seraphic smile. A full moon had risen, the shadows of the palm branches cast a tracery on his white burnous.

"You seem very satisfied with your adventure," I said.

"I thought it would amuse you—that is the only reason why I told it."

"And the girl has gone home to her parents?"

He nodded: "She is back at Chetma."

"I've seen divorced girls in their parents' houses," I told him. "Her life will drag on in miserable servitude, unless some old man, or one who cannot afford a virgin, accepts her in marriage. You have

“BABY’S” NARROW ESCAPE

consigned Attra to a hard fate. Harder perhaps than being the wife of Twati.”

“Do you really think that?”

“I *know* it.”

“Baby” was thoughtful. “Insha’Allah I may marry her,” he said at last.

“You should marry her, ‘Baby.’”

I thought of his mother who longed for him to be married, who had chosen Attra to be his wife. “Why shouldn’t you marry her?”

“I will wait nine months. I do not wish to be the father of Twati’s child. . . .”

But long before nine months had passed, “Baby” was bankrupt, as the Ben Ganas had predicted. Money-lenders foreclosed, his date garden was seized. He left Biskra and enlisted in the Foreign Legion.

CHAPTER XLIV

Some Englishmen

IN my childhood in Ireland when visitors were announced, I used to jump out of a ground-floor window and hide in the garden. Visitors affected me much in the same way at Biskra. One was so acclimatised to solitude that one had to brace oneself to face friends or the friends sent by friends. One day, however, a face peered through my BED-ROOM window, so there was no escape. I recognised the keen clear-cut features of Marcus Adams the child photographer! He had found an open door, no bell and empty rooms. His enthusiasm for Africa was that of an artist, and an artist he proved to be.

I took him for motor drives to show him the country. He continually leapt out of the car to photograph or cinematograph. Nomads, shepherds, camels, goats, palm trees—he made continuous lightning sketches as he stood up in the car, even while it was in motion. I never witnessed such activity. He stopped neither to eat nor sleep, and he conveyed in a few black and white lines the real character of the land.

Another enthusiast was the author of *Grand Tour*. Although his arrival filled me with misgiving, Patrick Balfour proved good-humoured about

SOME ENGLISHMEN

discomforts, uncomplaining about food, courteous to our Arab friends, and his sense of humour was aroused by things which I never suspected were funny. He spent several hours a day writing articles for English newspapers, and was to be found in any sheltered sunny spot (it was winter) writing in the most fantastic and contorted positions. Patrick has the longest legs of anyone I know and never knows what to do with them. I have been with him in a theatre and he all but takes a ticket for his legs; I mean, if there is an unoccupied seat in front his legs go over the top, and his feet occupy the seat. I sympathise with him, for I too have long legs and suffer torture in theatres.

At Biskra, Patrick borrowed burnouses, and when he didn't wear them on his back he curled his feet up in them. One of the sights was *L'honorable*, as he was called, unravelling himself. The last I saw of him was heading due south in a small two-seater Ford with Margaret. Their mattresses were strapped on the roof, the dickey seat was loaded up with spare parts, provisions, petrol tins, and water tanks. Their objective was the Niger and they made it. That is a story in itself and it isn't my story.

Margaret knew so little about driving a car that she had difficulty in stopping it once it was set in motion. At the very start she knocked down a donkey that failed to respond to her klaxoning. Patrick admitted frankly that he knew nothing about motors and was incapable even of taking a hand at the wheel. Nevertheless they succeeded in crossing the Sahara from north to south.

ARAB INTERLUDE

(I did not know at the time that Margaret had an assignation with a French officer governing a section of Dahomey, whom she had met in Paris and whom she subsequently married!)

Lord Ednam was another Englishman who made a good impression. He spoke French and had the manner of a Governor-General. No one can be more pleasant or pleasing than an Englishman when he *wishes* to please. But there was an older generation that had a completely different outlook: Colonel Paget wore a wide-brimmed hat with white muslin swathed round it and hanging down behind, called, I believe, a puggaree. He had seen service in India and Margaret revelled in his elephant stories. He rode with her every day, but he could not tolerate the simple familiar way our Arab friends dropped in on us.

I remember at tea-time one day a Ben Gana arrived, and after a few minutes' polite conversation asked if he could talk with me alone. I took him into the adjoining room and he explained to me that he was in difficulties. The Sheikh-el-Arab, whose duty it was to hand over a certain annual sum to the French Government by a certain date, deputed various of his relations, in the guise of Sheikhs and Caids, to collect the taxes for him. The year was a bad one, the date harvest had failed, and the Sheikh-el-Arab had been obliged to organise a fund to feed the starving. Given time in which to sell their reserves, or in extreme cases a bit of land, the taxes could be paid, but if they were hustled it meant destitution. My

SOME ENGLISHMEN

friend appealed to me for a sum of several thousand francs *immediately* to help to tide over *until the Arabs could pay*. I, a woman and a foreigner, was, in fact, being called upon in the name of friendship to pay the taxes of a tribe.

It was an awkward moment. I could not deny that I had the sum in the Bank, but I was still building and every penny was bespoke. Moreover, the sum that was required left me with a balance of approximately five hundred francs in all the world to live on for an indefinite period.

I was offered no guarantee, and no acknowledgment of the debt was committed to paper. I had nothing but the word of an Arab. Friendship was at stake. Refusal would be a proof of my mistrust. On the other hand, if I trusted and lost, extreme financial embarrassment would result. I have never been in a worse quandary. My hesitation, however, was short-lived; I knew I **MUST** do it, and proffered the cheque.

When I rejoined Margaret and the Colonel the old man scanned my troubled face and expressed his deep disapproval. "If you were in India . . . You could never . . ." And naturally I could not explain.

For some days I lived through considerable anxiety, wondering about my daily bread. The word of an Arab, however, (how surprised the French would be) held good. The money returned to me not in a lump sum or on any specified date; it came dribbling in over an extended period. As the poor people paid, their money was conveyed to me. Once or twice I accompanied the tax collector out of curiosity. We

drove to an oasis where my Ben Gana friend was received by the local Sheikh and installed in a big empty building that looked like a warehouse. Coffee was brought to us, local people came in to chat. At intervals men arrived with money. They were all miserably dressed, lean, half-starved, with eyes full of pain and strain, but they raised a smile of greeting, kissed the Ben Gana on the shoulder and in most cases added a gift of eggs, a hen, or a pigeon or two.

"A hateful business, this tax collecting," we agreed as we drove away.

The attitude towards natives of dear Colonel Paget reminds me that some time later I read the Life of Gandhi translated into French by Romain Rolland. Abdellah, who was always on the look-out for books of interest, borrowed it, and I was never able to get it back. It passed from Abdel' to Aissa, from "Alfonso" to Ali, eventually it reached the Sheikh-el-Arab. "Why are you so interested in Gandhi?" I asked. Abdellah explained. "It is not Gandhi, it is the British attitude towards natives that interests us. I used to resent the French, but thank God we are not under British domination."

One night the Sheikh-el-Arab had "distinguished" foreign visitors to dine; he asked some local French Colonials, the Garrison officers and others to meet them. The Sheikh-el-Arab was never very good at diagnosing Europeans, he mixed up French duchesses and princesses with other sorts. He admitted that he could see no difference between a *mondaine* who had a lover and a *demi-mondaine*. There were other differences that escaped him.

SOME ENGLISHMEN

This particular evening the ladies *de passage* (*i.e.* tourists) were a mixed lot. The Sheikh-el-Arab did the introductions, a business he abhorred, for names were a torture to him. But he had mastered the name of the Englishman, and turning to me presented "Your compatriot, Lord Lonsdale."

Lord Lonsdale was an old friend of my family; I had known him since my childhood. I had not heard that he was dead. I knew him to be childless and had no idea who was his heir. It seemed to me, however, that if he were dead the news would have penetrated to the Sahara, and I exclaimed incredulously: "But you are not Lord Lonsdale!"

The young man put his finger to his lips and emitted a low "Sh!"

I would not be "sh'd" and was about to protest when one of the Frenchwomen jogged my elbow and said: "It's true, it's true, he *is* Lonsdale!" He was not trying to masquerade as THE Lord Lonsdale, but for the occasion had allowed his French *compagnons de route* to tack "Lord" on to his name. "*Ça fait plus d'effet*," she said to me. "We French always expect an Englishman to be a Lord."

I was very angry, I could not bear that my own compatriots should behave as a great many foreigners of all nations did who came to Biskra. I rather spoilt the evening for *that* party, and the French Commandant said to me, "How *hard* you are, Madame!"

But the Sheikh-el-Arab thanked me afterwards, for he disliked very much, he said, when people tried to exploit his hospitality.

Then one afternoon Oliver Baldwin turned up with

ARAB INTERLUDE

the Khédive. The first time I saw Oliver was at a restaurant in Algiers, when I sent him word through a mutual friend that I'd like to know him. He sent back word that he didn't want to know me. I was surprised, for although he had led the Armenian army and been imprisoned by the Soviets, I thought we had much in common.

That year when he visited Biskra I naturally did not see him. The following year he sent me a note saying he'd like to see me. I sent a note back that I didn't want to see him. He came all the same. I walked into the sitting-room and found him there, standing with dusty feet on the silk bougainville-coloured divan, reaching up for a book on a top shelf. From his point of vantage he looked down upon me and said he had come to apologise. He had read *Nuda Veritas* and explained (I never understood why) that he realised his mistake. He was sorry he had said he didn't want to know me. He *did* want to, after all. After that I saw him every year.

When he brought the Khédive he was not entirely at his ease. Abbas Hilmy did not fit in exactly with his socialism, but he put that straight by carrying tea and cakes to the chauffeur, who was quite unused to five-o'clock tea or to being considered.

The Khédive, as I understood it, had been King of Egypt until the Allies dethroned him for being pro-German in the War. I remembered his big white steam yacht in the Bosphorus. It was waiting for him now at Algiers. He had come to Biskra with the idea of buying land, irrigating it in Egyptian fashion, and setting an example of what could be done in the

SOME ENGLISHMEN

agricultural line. He was discouraged at the outset. The Arabs whose property he wanted to buy, and which was valued at two million francs, could not resist asking three millions. The Oriental doubtless knew his Orientals! He didn't bargain, he merely shrugged his shoulders. It was stupid of the Arabs, for they were never likely to get such another offer. Biskra had not much attraction for people with two million francs to spend. The Maire, doubtless, was relieved, for what would have been his attitude towards this rich revolutionary element? The Sheikh-el-Arab and Aïssa Ben Gana refused to receive him, conscious as they always were of the critical eye of the French Republic.

Sitting on a little chair from which he overflowed copiously (in Sultanic robes he might have been impressive, but not in tight trousers), he asked me: "How can an intelligent woman, an artist such as you, endure to live in this lonely place? Come to the Côte d'Azur, Madame, you will be an object of pilgrimage for all of us."

Margaret was furious. She had arrived at the stage of hating anyone who spoke slightly of her beloved Biskra.

Another type of visitor was the representative of the S.P.C.A. I can't remember if I undertook any responsibilities or not. But Margaret was afraid I might and she didn't think I needed any encouragement. I was a perpetual embarrassment to her. She could not bear it when I got blood to the head and attacked an Arab for ill-treating an animal. Not that

ARAB INTERLUDE

she was indifferent, but she was self-conscious and considered it was undignified to make scenes in public.

The Arabs were not brutal in the Latin sense, they were just stupid and thickheaded. I was often surprised at the effect of my protests. One morning I was awakened by the howling of a dog in the garden across the road. I could hear the blows, and when it became unduly prolonged and the animal sounded as if it were being slowly murdered, I ran up on to the roof in my dressing-gown. The Nomad who was guardian of the garden was steadily flogging a half-starved Kabyle dog. I shouted to him to stop and he stopped at once, but protested that the dog had bitten his wife. I argued that he kept the dog for the purpose of biting people, what else was a Kabyle dog for? His wife should have been more careful. "In any case," I added, "that's enough." He submissively threw his stick away and went about his business.

The paradox of Arab brutality and pity was exemplified when a Nomad, loading stones from the *oued* into iron panniers on donkeys' backs, threw a stone at a donkey to send it in the desired direction. It happened to be more of a rock than a stone, and struck the donkey on the head. The donkey fell, and lay where it fell for two days, and all the time it continued to kick in a curious rhythmic way. Haafa said it was dead, and that dead animals did sometimes go on kicking. But as it did not cease to kick I finally sent Nasser down into the river to see if it were alive or dead, and Nasser pronounced it to be

SOME ENGLISHMEN

alive, but thought it would soon be dead. I hoped it would soon be dead, but meanwhile it continued to kick. Lazhari took it some water and Haafa bathed its nose. Some youths from the village gathered round and with the best intent made a pillow of stones for its head.

They were all full of pity and indignation.

"After all," said one, "the poor animal was doing its best ; it was working, and it was unkind of the Nomad to throw such a big stone."

In the evening I sent for the vet.

"For heaven's sake, end this. . . ." I pointed to the prostrate animal in the *oued*. The vet. was accomplished in the matter of immediate and painless death, he settled the donkey at once. He said it had meningitis and made his report. The Municipality paid his fee, and to the great satisfaction of our village the Nomad was arrested and flung into prison. The S.P.C.A. delegate could hardly have hoped that French officialdom would act so peremptorily.

CHAPTER XLV

Some Americans

BEFORE our spare room was finished a cousin with her American mother and Irish maid came out from England.

They wanted to throw off their influenza and telegraphed me to take rooms for them.

They arrived with ten Saratoga trunks and found the hotel I had selected too expensive. The less expensive ones had not sufficient wardrobe space.

We viewed each of the eight hotels, and as not one of them seemed suitable I suggested (*noblesse oblige*) they should stay with us. As by this time they were on the verge of collapse (and I of hysteria) they accepted. The outer aspect of our house seemed to create a good impression. The mother of my cousin said it was exactly what she had expected. a white house surrounded by palm trees.

Margaret gave up her bedroom to the two (Ali the Mason had said it was large enough for a family). The maid had Dick's room (he was away at Algiers). Margaret slept in the living-room, having emptied the contents of all her cupboards on to my floor.

I have always been willing to suffer any discomfort for my friends or for anyone who appreciates the necessity. Both the children share my Russian sense of hospitality, *i.e.* that my roof is available to as many

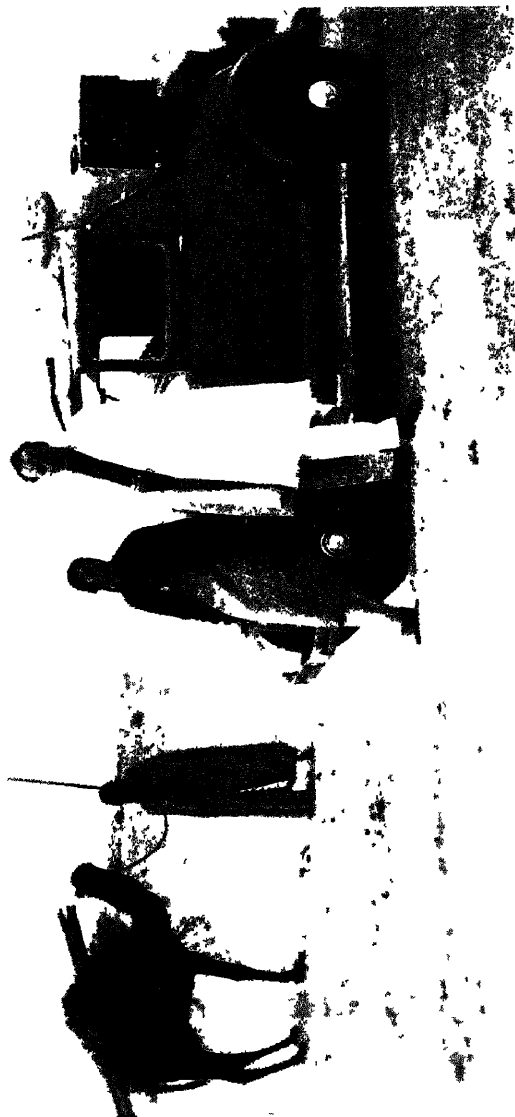
SOME AMERICANS

as can find shelter beneath it. When Mary and Joseph arrived at Bethlehem in the night, they found there was no room, "not even around the door." I proudly offered a room with two beds. It wasn't luxury, but then our standard of life was simple. Saulea, for the occasion, was got in to help. Haafa showed her how to make a bed and sweep a floor. Her trailing veils and draperies inevitably caused casualties among the ornaments. The only thing Margaret minded was when she broke the Chinese china cat. It was black and white with a red collar and a gold bell; it slept snugly on a red plush cushion. It had slept from New York to Königsberg, from Constantinople to Algiers. When Saulea wept and fell on her knees to beg forgiveness and kissed my hands, one simply had to say it didn't matter . . . that it was really an ugly cat, that one was rather glad never to see it again. Of course one did see it again: one bit in the kitchen cupboard, and another adorning a shelf in Haafa's house. But to return to the cousins: the young one who was supposed to be asthmatic was made to walk about with a handkerchief tied across her mouth to keep out the sand that was supposed to fill the air. That is to say WHEN she walked about, but most of the time she lay inert upon a garden mattress because her mother drugged her with preventive cures. The Sahara being sandy came to them as a great surprise, and "Mother" protested that it was the worst possible place for a victim of asthma to recover from influenza.

Moreover, the house, satisfactory on first sight, proved to be full of snags. The absence of electric

bells was a great grievance. Impossible to get hold of that Irish maid without shouting. Nor were they accustomed to sit on the floor. It laddered expensive silk stockings.

We had never been able to afford chairs, the sort of chairs that English people regard as comfort, nor would they have been in keeping with the character of the house. However, with the help of Haafa and Nasser we managed to fix up some forms with planks, and the big copper tray that did duty for dining-table and had always stood on three short legs was raised on to a deal table borrowed from the kitchen. It wasn't beautiful, but it enabled them to sit up to their food. FOOD . . . that was the real drama! They could not eat Arab food. Haafa tried his hand at grilling cutlets, but one requires to know something of Saharan sheep to appreciate a mutton cutlet in North Africa. To eliminate Arab food was to invite starvation. Luckily they discovered a provision store in Biskra main street that stocked various brands of cheese. We, or rather they, lived forthwith on cheese. Nor did they like Arabs. None of our friends had any success with them. The mother of my cousin, being American, included them in a sweeping category called "niggers." The sight of El Hadj at night struck terror into the American heart. Hadj was distinctly negroid, he had an ugly face, in fact what Sheridan described as a "d——d disinheriting countenance." He stood particularly revealed whenever we returned after dark and he opened the gates in the full glare of the headlights. With his gun (Dick's gun, which was a perpetual grievance to



Margaret Sheridan and Patrick Balfour with their mattresses on the roof of the Ford in which they
crossed the Sahara to the Niger



Roman ruins at Diana Veteranorum

SOME AMERICANS

Dick) slung across his back, he looked extremely aggressive. I assured my cousin that he was quite harmless really, and slept like a little child whom an earthquake could not awaken. She suggested that for the duration of her visit I should engage a second night-watchman, one to protect us against the other. . . .

The success of the visit was the Irish maid. Haafa took a fancy to her. He would not allow her to do any work. He seized the broom from her hand and swept out her room for her. Men, he said, were made to work for women. For months afterwards we had to translate letters he received from England.

Then Count Fred de Janzé arrived on his wedding tour with his second American wife. She too had a complex about Arabs and could not bear even to brush past one in a crowd. They agreed to rent our house the following winter. Fred wanted to hunt moufflon and gazelle. His wife stipulated that she must have "ELEVEN BODY SERVANTS." Her husband's untimely death liquidated the problem.

It was intensely strange to come upon Americans straight from America whose vibrations were still adjusted to the Western world. They made waves on our desert ether.

Scott Fitzgerald, author of *The Beautiful and the Damned*, and his wife arrived at our door on camels. They were in a great hurry, hardly had time to stop and chat, no time to stop and lunch. The camels were waiting and they must get to the desert. They

ARAB INTERLUDE

had a return inclusive ticket which allowed them just sufficient time to get from New York to the desert and back again. Shane Leslie had told them to be sure and look us up, and as we were on their route they thought they'd just stop and say "Hullo." They didn't stop ten minutes. How they managed to adapt their vibrations, even for a day, to the slow motion of a camel was a wonder, for nothing will make a camel hurry. It must have been calculated in the scheduled trip.

CHAPTER XLVI

Prince Sixte

ONE early April morning before the heat of the day, two strangers walked across the garden. I glared, for tourists did sometimes break in. One of the intruders, hat in hand, introduced himself: "I am Prince Sixte de Bourbon. Your cousin, Shane Leslie, asked me to come and see you." He introduced his brother Xavier.

They had arrived from the South, having done an important trek to Lake Tchad from Tunis. Squatting cross-legged on the camel-hair carpet, they said things about Biskra. . . .

It was a disappointing, banal, ugly, beggar-ridden, guide-exploited town, and they meant to leave that afternoon. I agreed with them that it was provincial, pretentious, and altogether hateful. . . . I never went to it unless necessity obliged me. Our talk was distracted by a Nomad caravan passing up the *oued* on its way to the Northern grazing grounds. The intense light grew intenser, accentuating the depth of the shadow in which we sat. After a while Sixte remarked that I had found a lovely place in which to live, and I suggested they had better come back in the evening and dine. He accepted on condition that he might be allowed to bring some food, knowing the limited resources of the town. From

the Transatlantique Hotel he could procure things that were unobtainable in the market or any of the stores.

They returned at sunset—Sixte carrying an entire salmon, and Xavier ten kilos of ice dripping from a basket, and some bottles of champagne. I had long since forgotten the existence of such luxuries.

Just at dinner-time the musicians arrived whom I had quickly summoned. There was not a breath of wind, masses of stars, a chorus of cri-cris and bullfrogs and the heavy scent of datura flowers. Sixte, wrapped in a white burnous, and Xavier in his Spanish *capa*, merged harmoniously into the picture.

"In a few days," said Sixte, "I shall be back in Paris and have to pretend I am pleased."

We talked far into the night, comparing African notes. They told us about their trans-Saharan trek. Prince Xavier was full of humour, Prince Sixte full of poetry. Africa was the *leitmotiv*. Sixte talked of the desert as a lover of a mistress.

The next day I placed myself at their disposal and drove them to Timgad, which, by a stretch of the imagination, could be considered on the road to Paris. It was a broiling day, and about half-way Sixte took the wheel. He said he had often driven a Renault, which was not hard to believe, but he took the turnings at ninety kilometres, and I wept from sheer nerves, which made him laugh and go faster.

Timgad is more complete than any Roman remains in Italy, and there are no other human habitations of any epoch to spoil the effect. It lies in the plain,

PRINCE SIXTE

isolated and sunbaked, its broken columns pointing at the cloudless sky.

After wandering over the paved streets furrowed by chariot wheels, we lingered by the fountain where water overflowed on to purple iris in full bloom ; we ate our sandwiches on the steps of the Temple of Jupiter. . . .

A precious friendship dated from that epoch. I never passed through Paris without seeing Prince Sixte. He would drive me to the Bois, and there, walking round the lake or through the green interlacing groves, we talked of Africa.

He was a great personality, democratic and simple, a sportsman, a *grand seigneur*. He is little known in England, but France knows that he tried through his own personal relationships to stop the War in 1917 by persuading Austria to make a separate peace. Only the jealousy of statesmen prevented his success. The facts are historical and need no comment.

His passion for Africa unfortunately cost him his life.

After another extremely arduous expedition, blazing a trail across unknown territory, he contracted a germ specifically Saharan and apparently incurable. After a lingering and terrible illness he died in Paris in March 1934. But his name is written in the shifting sands of the desert, and that, strange as it may sound, is a stabler memorial than carved stone.

CHAPTER XLVII

Roman Ruins

"PEOPLE say the Romans were *big* men" (*des grands hommes*), said Haafa, misinterpreting the legendary meaning of the word "big."

One talked of the Romans as of yesterday.

Biskra was a Roman outpost. Our doctor dug up a god of agriculture under his lawn. I always surmised the presence of a Roman Centurion in my garden after dark. It may have been my imagination, for, of course, I wanted him to be there.

Margaret would take a spade and dig in the river-bank. She unfailingly brought back pieces of pottery, opalescent glass, a terra-cotta oil lamp, and other debatable fragments.

In the middle of the *oued* stands a diminutive white-domed mosque. This is the tomb of Sidi Sersour, a General of the Prophet's army. All the records seem to confirm that he fell there in battle. The sarcophagus is draped in brocade, banners hang from the ceiling.

The tomb has withstood all the floods. The Arabs are convinced that the waters divide miraculously as they approach the holy tomb. Divide they do, because the Roman foundations upon which it is built stubbornly defy them. If ever a flood were to

ROMAN RUINS

carry away Sidi Sersour the faithful would lose their faith.

There is another block of Roman masonry not far from the tomb. The little narrow bricks upon great stone slabs are cemented according to pattern. Every Friday night the guardian of the mosque burned incense within the hollow wall. Whenever on a Friday night the wind was from the north-east, incense pervaded our garden. The Arabs had no theory as to the origin of these foundations, they simply venerated them as something mystic that defied time and flood. It was evident, however, that they were the pylons of a Roman bridge. With the centuries, the earth has been washed away from around the pylons. A mosque had been built upon one, the top of the other is level with the mainland.

Once a year there was a great Feast in honour of Sidi Sersour. The guardian collected contributions from the villagers and bought a fat ox for sacrifice. The meat was divided among the poor. That day a procession made its way down the river-bed from Biskra town. Spahis in scarlet burnouses riding white horses were followed by the Ouled Naïl dancing-girls in all their finery, and after them the rest of Biskra, accompanied by tom-toms and the firing of guns. A colourful scene in the radiant sunlight.

Timgad also had its annual celebration, but of another kind. The Comédie Française performed a classical play in the Graeco-Roman theatre. That day everybody who had a car set out early in the morning northward. There were picnic parties, generally

ARAB INTERLUDE

among the ruins of Lambèse a few kilometres from Timgad, where an Arch of Triumph stands monumentally in a meadow of wild tulips. The scene in the theatre later in the day was perhaps more vividly Roman than any picture of the imagination. The white-draped crowd sat in serried rows—attentive, silent, and appreciative. One year the sky was threatening (a welcome contrast to the usual blinding glare), and when “*Œdipus*” invoked “*Jupiter ! Dieu des tonnerres . . . !*” a terrific burst of thunder drowned the rest of his words.

Jupiter had come to life!

Roman ruins were a welcome change : After being steeped for months in date palms, Arabs, and desert, I felt an indefinable craving, not for civilisation, as might be expected, not for theatres, movies, shops, nor social life; but a longing for trees with spreading branches and big leaves, a longing, too, for Art or Architecture.

The first trees that I sighted on the journey northward were a never-failing delight. Only those who have been starved of vegetation can imagine the thrill of a leafy tree! As for dead Timgad, it was more living to me than a modern town. I loved to wander along those silent streets that re-echoed the clip-clap of my sandalled feet. I loved to muse, solitarily, upon the thing that had been Rome, and had conquered not only Africa but an island off the coast of Gaul!

In the opposite direction to Timgad, an unfre-

ROMAN RUINS

quented by-road through the hills and juniper woods leads to a vast plain surrounded by mountains. The triumphal arch of Diana Veteranorum rises stark out of the plain. Diana was utterly deserted except for the shepherds and their flocks. A bit of the forum had been excavated, but it was more silent, more exquisitely slumbering even than Timgad. The paved worn way emerging from sand and scrub, passed through the archway to be lost again in endless scrub. . . .

In this land of nomadic people whose only instinct is to destroy, who have created nothing themselves, who have defied Roman civilisation as they are defying the French—this commemoration of a Roman triumph had survived as a miracle.

The silence of death was broken by a shepherd piping a tune on his frail reed flute. There was a rustling in the wild sage—was it the wind, or a Roman ghost who recognised in me the race that has carried on the traditions in which Rome has slumbered so long?

CHAPTER XLVIII

Mother and Brother

THE last winter that I spent at Biskra my mother (aged eighty-two) arrived with my brother Peter from Switzerland in his Baby Austin.

Peter was rather tired on arrival, but my mother could not rest until she had seen everything.

Unfortunately it rained in torrents and the house leaked. Brother and mother, who had deplored my "wasting money building a mud house in the Sahara," were not impressed. Ali the Mason assured them (in self-defence) that every house was leaking in the town—even the best houses! Peter said (rightly perhaps) that if instead of a flat roof I had had a ridged, tiled roof, as in a civilised country, the rain would have run off it. He prophesied that my house would not last fifty years and that it would end in a mud mound like the Turkish fort. All of which may indeed come true, only I shall not be there to know about it nor will he be there to say "I told you so."

My mother said, "Such a pity you didn't build it on the Côte d'Azur, dear"; to which I countered that it could hardly have been done at the same price.

When the weather cleared and the garden paths dried up, she summoned the Arab who had camels for hire, and was photographed, all in white, complete

MOTHER AND BROTHER

with big white sun-hat, on the back of Biskra's favourite white camel.

A diversion was created when Count Francis de Clermont-Tonnerre and his wife turned up in their aeroplane from Paris. We gave a party for them on a hot night. Dick fixed up electric bulbs among the marigolds and we danced in the tiled courtyard under flood-lit date palms. The sky was deep blue, spangled with huge stars, as it appears only in Africa.

The next day they gave my mother her *baptême d'air*. It was indeed her first flight, and she declared that flying is admirably suited to old people; they are transported from point to point without any effort.

Having said he would take up any of my friends who desired a trial flight I gave *rendezvous* to Aïssa on the landing-ground. Word went round and our Arab friends turned up in a bunch.

"Tell him," they implored me excitedly, "tell him to fly over the Sheikh-el-Arab's house. . . ."

Such is the fascination of forbidden fruit that they excitedly peered down into the Chief's inner courtyard, delighted at the sight of female figures staring up, who might equally have been slaves or wives or daughters of the house. The next day Dick flew with them to El-Oued.

Perhaps it would be an exaggeration to say that by air El-Oued is only a few minutes away. By motor it takes from morning till night. By camel it is five days.

El-Oued is to the south-east in the direction of the Tunisian border. It is even more in the sands than Touggourt or Ouargla. An exquisite place embedded,

ARAB INTERLUDE

so to speak, in the dunes. If one has seen the whole Sahara it avails nothing if one has not seen El-Oued.

Having decided to show it to Peter we had some difficulty in dissuading our mother from accompanying us. She, too, wanted to see the desert, to understand its lure. My experience of most of our desert treks made it advisable not to take her. I described to her the way we habitually stuck in sand. She assured me she would like to "stick in sand," that it would be a new experience.

I added that we might have to sleep out, there was no guarantee of our reaching our objective.

Then she smiled wistfully and said: "I see you don't want me." She wouldn't believe that her children were genuinely concerned in sparing her fatigue.

Curiously enough we hardly ever thought of sparing her. She was so game, her energy sometimes outran our own. She was endowed (and had endowed us) with what we are used to call "Jerome resistance." My mother was one of the three Jerome sisters, famous for their wit and beauty. A sweet exotic personality whose spiritual epoch was the Second Empire. She had been included in Compiègne house parties for the Prince Imperial. Her photograph at that time, with curls in her neck and *décolletée* shoulders, resembled a picture by Winterhalter. From the Court of Napoleon III to an aeroplane jaunt over the Sahara is a hyphen of time not to be despised.

The possibility of her having to sleep in a sand-dune under the stars, although it held no terror for

MOTHER AND BROTHER

her, filled Peter and myself with misgiving. She reluctantly gave in, but was up at dawn to see us start. Salan accompanied us, he had never been to El-Oued. Peter, like all drivers, hating to be driven and disdaining the Renault, adventured his Baby Austin. We had a store of provisions and plenty of bottles of Evian to give us a feeling of security. It happened to be blowing a sirocco; the hot wind has the capacity of irritating machines as well as humans. Both cars heated, but the Baby Austin boiled. Long before we reached El-Oued our store of Evian had been poured down the Baby's neck! We arrived in the usual state of exhaustion at sunset. The European inhabitants (postmaster, store-keeper, and doctor) turned out to see the new arrivals.

El-Oued is, I think, of all the oases the most beautiful. The houses, instead of being flat, are all domed to enable the sand to slide off the roofs, otherwise the town would have been buried long ago. As there is neither stone nor timber the houses are built of a local plaster, and have to be rebuilt every fifteen years.

The fascination of a desert town is not only its archaic irregularity, as though it were a picture by Matisse, but the effect of the brilliant sunlight on the whitewashed walls and of the sharp dark angular shadows. The dark-faced white crowd too, instead of the white-faced dark crowd of one's own race.

In El-Oued I was more conscious of these contrasts than in any other place I have seen in the Sahara.

For some kilometres before one comes to El-Oued a line of palm-tree crests serpentines curiously across

the open, following the course of an underground river.

Legend says of the date palm that it grows with its feet in the water and its head in the sun. At El-Oued this is vividly illustrated. Here, too, one witnesses the untiring struggle of the native against the encroachment of sand. They build up walls of sand to protect their palm gardens. It may take years to accomplish. We watched a labourer, with one small pannier-laden donkey, impassively unload his little heaps on the gigantic parapet. He was in no way discouraged either by the magnitude of the labour or by the minute instrument at his disposal. Had he not eternity before him . . . ?

Facing the great sandy waste stood the large domed house of Abdul Aziz, the Bash Agha of El-Oued.

He was both cousin and brother-in-law of the Sheikh-el-Arab and received us hospitably. Of Turkish origin, he had the appearance of an old Sultan. He had been a prisoner of war in the hands of the Germans and knew all there was to know about Russians and their habits; he also knew the difference between an Englishman and an Irishman. With a mischievous twinkle he stimulated conversation by asking two questions:

Does an Irishman MIND being called an Englishman?
Do they speak the same language?

He then sat back and smiled smugly, the while Peter and I got more and more heated.

Although Peter and I share an Irish grandmother and spent our childhood and our youth in Southern Ireland, Peter has evolved into the loyal Englishman

MOTHER AND BROTHER

that a Commander in His Majesty's Navy should be. The blood of our grandmother would seem to have concentrated in her female descendant.

The Bash Agha must have had some experience of Anglo-Irish dissensions when he was prisoner of war, his provocation had been so well conceived. Dick, if I remember right, came to my rescue. He always had from childhood a proud sense of his Irish lineage. Margaret, on the contrary, remained detached. She never appeared to have any racial origin. As though to atone for his misdeed, the Bash Agha presented me with a pure-bred Sluigi dog. His name was Faïd, and his head so narrow that one had almost to choke him to prevent him slipping his collar, but he managed to slip it when I took him for a walk in the dunes. It was a wonderful sight; he bounded away hardly touching the sand, flying rather than running. His movements reminded me of a dolphin that rolls through the water. He preserved this incredible pace until he was lost to sight, merged into one with the desert of which he was the same colour.

The Bash Agha insisted on dispatching a horseman to fetch him back. The Nomad camp must have been a long way off, for he did not return until far into the night.

On the return journey (with Faïd, who in the intervals of trying to spring overboard was violently sick in the car) we broke a spring, which Salan and Dick "fixed" with twine, but the Baby Austin petered out completely. Sand in the carburettor or Evian in the bonnet, whatever the cause, she had to be towed. It is a tiring job to tow a car for one hundred kilometres.

Dick was in his element, he took the wheel. He only enjoys driving under difficulties.

In the middle of nowhere, two days' journey by camel from El-Oued, we were waylaid by Nomads who asked us to keep a look-out for a lost camel. They were not sure whether it had been stolen in the night or merely strayed. Exactly what we were to do with it if we found it was not quite clear, but it was easily recognisable they said, for it was young and had a load of grain on its back. Salan did not know why we laughed. He said it was a very serious loss and that he would report it on his return to Biskra.

Later in the day we stopped at the signalled request of a solitary Nomad, who asked if we had seen a stray camel. Salan was full of conversation. We had seen no camel, he explained, but we knew all about it, and if we did chance to see it we would—eh, report it! The man asked for a cigarette. Salan gave him all he had, and all that was left of our provisions and water. The Nomad was certainly two days behind his caravan and three days distant from El-Oued. I asked how he would have managed to feed himself if he had not met us? He said he would have gone hungry. The resignation and the staying power of the Nomads is truly surprising. Their belief in the Lord providing was amply fulfilled this time.

A few hours later we came in sight of a camel driven by another solitary Nomad. Before we had even got close up Salan exclaimed that that was the missing camel. "How do you know?" I asked. Salan couldn't explain, he just insisted that it was the



FIG. 2. A view of the site in the middle



Mahatma Gandhi
(by the Author)

MOTHER AND BROTHER

missing camel, and of course it was. The Nomad who had found it after a long search said it had strayed, it had not been stolen. We told him that if he kept going he would eventually fetch up with his comrade to whom we had given our store of food. "Tell the others," said the Nomad, "tell the others who are looking for the beast that it is found . . ." and so we told the glad news to every Arab we met along the way. And every time we stopped, Faïd made a desperate attempt to rejoin the Nomad. He did not seem to care for any Nomad in particular, but just Nomads in general. He was a desert dog and he could only be happy in the desert.

Faïd got used to me after a bit, and although I offered him a variety of good food (which always made him sick) he preferred to eat dates, always carefully spitting out the stones.

For many months the presence of Faïd complicated life, for a state of war existed between him and Binks. My terror was lest they should ever meet. Faïd was shut up at night while Binks was free. At dawn Binks was relegated to the roof of the house, and the two would bark savagely at one another, Faïd springing upward and Binks showing all his teeth and with his hair bristling, balanced perilously on the parapet.

Binks's hatred was such that once he leapt down from the roof, and twice he fell and lay stunned but uninjured. Happily I was on the spot and seized Faïd before he could attack.

It was a matter of conjecture among the members of the household as to which had the best chances of

ARAB INTERLUDE

winning. Faïd had the advantage of size and weight, and terrific muscles in his neck. Binks had all the bravery and ferocity of his race, and a woolly coat for protection.

Then one day the clash came. It was horrible beyond description. Faïd rolled Binks over and over, shaking him and tearing mouthfuls of hair out of him. Binks tore Faïd's smooth loose skin so that he bled profusely. Haafa and I threw water over them, and Margaret threw a heavy *toube*, which missed them and nearly broke Haafa's ankle. In the end Hadj, the night-watchman, seized Faïd by the tail and pulled hard, and Lazhari laid hold of Binkie's tail—the result was that ever after the two dogs respected one another. Neither had lost and neither had won. They were pretty well matched and they knew that neither had superiority over the other. They never ceased to insult one another from roof and garden, but when by accident they both happened to be loose, Faïd pretended he did not see Binks, and Binks without looking to the right or left went rather self-consciously back to his proper place on the roof.

I loved Binks, he had "a way" with him. Whenever I carried him in my arms he grunted with satisfaction, and he smiled, showing all his white teeth.

I did not love Faïd, he was too indifferent, but I appreciated his beauty. He was like the most perfect sculpture.

One day he followed a Nomad back into the desert. . . . He was never seen again.

CHAPTER XLIX

Pilgrim's Progress

HINDU merchants owned the best shops in Biskra and sold the best things. They were curiously reserved. One saw them sitting outside their shops, watching the passing crowd with detachment. They were dignified and polite, and appeared completely indifferent as to whether anyone bought their wares or not. One might have supposed they had other means of subsistence.

Although they were British subjects they never proclaimed themselves British, as for instance the Maltese.

There seemed little fraternisation between them and the Arab population. I never heard the Hindus discussed. They certainly ranked themselves on a higher level, but they provoked no dissension. They captured most of the tourist trade by displaying the inevitable oriental trash manufactured in Europe that delights the tourist. Behind the scenes they had stores of treasures from India, sahris worth hundreds of pounds, and antique embroideries there was not a chance of selling. In view of my appreciation they would invite me into their back parlours, order coffee and sweet cakes, and untiringly unravel their best pieces. Amid gleaming stuffs draped haphazard and piled in heaps, I would succeed in guiding the

ARAB INTERLUDE

conversation on to the one topic that interested me and concerning which I wanted news. At first they were unwilling to talk about their Mahatma. I was British and they were cautious. It was not until I mentioned something about being Irish that the barrier was lowered. Gandhi's paper, *Young India*, reached them regularly, and I induced them to lend it to me. After a while I became a specialist on the passive resistance movement. When *Young India* was suppressed it reached us in a more primitive form, one copy only and therefore infinitely precious. I was made a member of the "chain," that is to say it was passed from hand to hand; I received it in turn, and passed it on. There were Swiss papers, too, that printed extensive accounts of Congress activities. When it was announced that Gandhi was on his way to England to attend the Round Table Conference, I determined to meet him, my intention being to do a portrait of him. The month was September, the year 1931.

It was not easy!

I was unable to discover anyone among my acquaintances or friends who knew, or even wished to know, Gandhi.

At last, in despair and sincerely convinced that I had once met her, I rang up Dr. Maud Royden. By appointment I went to see her and to my embarrassment realised I had never seen her before. Her face was quite unfamiliar to me, but because my name was not unfamiliar to her, she had granted me an interview. As a matter of fact Maud Royden is one

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

of those big people with whom no explanations or apologies are necessary. Over a cup of tea we talked as simply and earnestly as if we were old acquaintances. I explained to her the object of my visit. She admitted that she had not yet met Gandhi, but she knew his great friend Mrs. Naidu, the Hindu poetess, and put me in touch with her.

Mrs. Naidu sent me an invitation to a party that the Hindu ladies were giving for the Mahatma's birthday in a big hall somewhere near the Tottenham Court Road. There were to be speeches and I was to seek her out on the platform afterwards. Armed with my ticket, I was admitted into the colourful gathering. The women in their brilliant sahris were an entertaining paradox: so decoratively feminine, and such aggressive feminists!

I was in the tea-room when my attention was arrested by the arrival of Mirabei (Miss Slade). She could not have entered unnoticed. It was not that she was beautiful, though she seemed to be so, in spite of the fact that her head, draped in a coarse cotton veil, was closely shaved. Her beauty was statuesque, but it was more than that, she had radiancy, dignity, poise. Although she was attired as Sainte Geneviève in the fresco by Puvis de Chavannes and all eyes were fixed upon her in curiosity, she had not a vestige of self-consciousness. I was fascinated as much by her personality, the way she walked and talked, by her gestures and the expression in her eyes, as by the attitude of deference which she inspired.

Having waited for some time, an announcement was at last forthcoming to the effect that the Mahatma

had been delayed at the conference, but was on his way.

There was a general movement towards the passageway leading to the entrance.

A woman in an orchid sari bordered with gold turned and surveyed the crowd of men, several of whom had cigarettes in their mouths. In a severe metallic voice she said: "How dare you smoke when HE is arriving!"

Without a word of protest every cigarette disappeared.

After what seemed an age of waiting the big limousine drew up at last, and out stepped the little white-draped smiling figure with bare legs as thin as sticks.

The crowd surged eagerly towards him, hands pressed together as if in prayer, which is the Hindu form of salutation.

It is difficult for anyone to have an accurate appreciation of Gandhi who has only read the deformation of him in the Press, and seen the carefully selected photographic caricatures of the little bare-legged man, smiling, with a cavity where a tooth should be, ears that stand out, a pendulous nose and a bald pate—such is Gandhi as seen by the Philistine. There is this advantage, that his followers cannot be accused of being seduced by his good looks! It is the spirit within, and purely the spirit, that dominates, and although many people are touched by spirit, a few are not.

For half an hour I watched him on the platform among the exotically draped women who had organised

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

the party in his honour. They made speeches, they presented him with vast baskets of fruit, they wreathed him according to Hindu custom in garlands of flowers. He smiled tolerantly and accepted the offerings in the spirit of a Buddha. After he had spoken a few brief words of thanks he hurried away and I joined Sarojini Naidu on the platform. She had already spoken about me to the "Great little Mahatma," as she called him, who had declared he would never pose, but that if I could manage to do anything during the hours he reserved for spinning I was welcome. She advised me to be at his house in Knightsbridge the next morning at nine o'clock.

CHAPTER I

The Great Little Mahatma

THE house in Knightsbridge had been placed at Gandhi's disposal by some friends. He had accepted it as a meeting-centre, but he would not sleep there; the friend of the poor preferred to rest at night in the East End. To enable him to do this with a minimum of fatigue, a Hindu living in London had placed his car and himself as chauffeur at the Mahatma's disposal.

Every morning from nine o'clock until midday people came to call upon him in Knightsbridge, to interview him, to pay their respects or to ask his advice. A curious colourful medley!

The morning he found me installed with my modelling stand and an embryo clay head he looked at me with an expression of dismay. As he settled down on the floor to his spinning-wheel I was obliged to move my work down on to the same level. I may say that I did Gandhi on my knees!

His "disciples" were fussy and tried to tell me where I was to put myself. They seemed fearful lest I approached too close. I did not mean to let anyone interfere in my work or come between me and my model. I got nearer and nearer; I sprawled across the floor to get a close-up view. At first he busied himself preparing his spinning-wheel and joining

THE GREAT LITTLE MAHATMA

strands of wool. I sensed a silent resentment. Then suddenly, like Lenin, he looked up, and almost in the same words and with the same ironical smile, observed, "So you are the cousin of Mr. Winston Churchill?"

It was the same old joke: Winston's relation modelling the features of his enemy! And Gandhi pursued:

"You know he refuses to see me? But you will tell him, won't you, from me, how glad I am to make your acquaintance!"

In case he should mistake for curiosity the motive that prompted me to model him, I explained that I'd read *Young India* at Biskra. No sooner did he begin to talk, however, than we were interrupted. The first arrival was a Mr. Green, announced by a secretary who added in a whisper, "He knew you in South Africa."

The Mahatma shot a glance at the visitor:

"Good morning, Mr. Green, sit down. . . ." He indicated an arm-chair near by and proceeded with his spinning.

"Thank you, Mr. Gandhi," said Mr. Green. "I have been wanting so much to see you again. Do you remember our talks in South Africa?"

"I remember South Africa, but I do not remember you, Mr. Green."

"Don't you remember the garden of the hotel in Durban?"

"I was in an hotel in Durban, but I never went into the garden." He began to chuckle softly and added:

"They only tolerated a Hindu in the hotel on

ARAB INTERLUDE

condition he stuck to his room and didn't attempt to go into the garden! But that is of no interest. I am delighted to see you, Mr. Green, but I wouldn't like to keep you if you are in a hurry."

Mr. Green retired discomfited.

After Mr. Green a rather elegantly dressed Englishman was greeted with great friendliness. But the visitor seemed at a loss for a topic of conversation. He talked about the weather and the remarkable greenness of England.

"Yes, yes," answered the Mahatma, as if his thoughts were afar.

The visitor, however, was none other than the doctor who saved his life, operating on him for appendicitis by candlelight.

The doctor was followed by a good-looking Frenchwoman. She was a lawyer and Gandhi talked of some work of hers he'd read. Then he asked:

"And how is France? Does she still preserve her war spirit?"

The young woman drew herself up:

"Monsieur Gandhi, we did not make the war, we defended ourselves."

Next came C. F. Andrews the Missionary, whose *Life of Mahatma Gandhi* has been translated into French by Romain Rolland. The bearded giant knelt before the Mahatma while he discussed details for the week-end.

"Yes, yes," agreed Gandhi, who was absorbed in mending the thread that had broken.

"And this evening, *babu* (grandfather), don't forget the reception by fifteen Anglican bishops. The Bishop

THE GREAT LITTLE MAHATMA

of London is going there expressly to meet you. It is at seven o'clock."

Gandhi looked up sharply. "What about the seven o'clock prayer?"

Andrews suggested that it should be either advanced or retarded. Finally Gandhi decided. "It shall be in the car, on the way."

Presently the editor of (I think) the *New Statesman* turned up. Gandhi was on the defensive, expecting him to be as hostile as most other journalists. This one, however, was different, and very cleverly, little by little, he won over the Mahatma and succeeded even in getting him to pause in his spinning and talk. I heard all the things I wanted to know. Every question I had longed to ask was answered at last. It was the most outspoken political discussion I could ever have hoped to hear.

The Englishman had very precise arguments. Gandhi had an answer to everything. Naturally there was mention of Mohammedan-Hindu intolerance, and in reply to the eternal argument that they would cut each other's throats if the British left them to it, Gandhi smiled ironically.

"It is curious," he said, "that the biggest fights have occurred in those places where the British have the largest garrisons."

"But still," insisted the Englishman, "you must admit that if we totally abandoned India there would be chaos."

"Yes, at first," agreed Gandhi; "but the situation is already so confused that it can hardly get much worse. You in England are wrestling with very

ARAB INTERLUDE

great problems of your own: why shouldn't we muddle through by ourselves without you?"

After that the wife of Paul Robeson flopped down on the floor and fixed him with her big melancholy eyes:

"Mr. Gandhi, what is your opinion of the negro question in the United States?"

"Mr." Gandhi, who obviously hadn't given the question a thought, answered evasively.

Mrs. Robeson produced statistics.

"Do you think some day that the negroes will predominate?"

"I do not think so."

"Do you think we may be assimilated?"

"Perhaps——"

"And then——?"

"Well, then, the problem will cease to be a negro problem, it will be the problem of another race!"

A Canon of the Anglican Church was ushered in. A big, broad, grey-haired dignitary. The Mahatma dropped his spinning and stood up to receive him. Having invited him to be seated in the arm-chair he settled himself once more on the floor, re-adjusted the *Kaddar* over his knees, and resumed his spinning.

The Canon produced a small autograph book and shyly asked:

"Mr. Gandhi—I wonder if you would write something for me——?"

"Certainly, certainly. Bring me a stylo—where is the stylo? Find the stylo. . . ."

THE GREAT LITTLE MAHATMA

While the secretaries and disciples were hunting for the stylo the Canon explained:

"I would like a message, please: I want to know what we are to do to be better Christians?"

The Mahatma took the book and wrote. . . . The Canon departed satisfied.

Suddenly a young German woman burst in unannounced. She seemed to know the Mahatma well enough to enter without ceremony. He extended a hand to her :

"You are going back to Germany?"

She bowed her head, took his hand in both of hers and held it as though she held some sacred relic. Her lips twitched but she did not speak. There were tears in her eyes. She took a few steps backwards, her arms still extended and her eyes fixed upon him in a kind of ecstasy. A sob . . . "Good-bye" . . . and she disappeared.

A turbaned messenger arrived from the Agha Khan:

"His Highness would like to see you. Very important . . . hopes you will agree to arbitration. . . ."

"Yes—yes, certainly. . . . Tell the Agha Khan that I'll be happy to see him."

A Hindu student came to present his American bride.

Gandhi shot a glance of appreciation at her, and then asked the young man:

"Do you intend to take your wife to India?"

His answer in the affirmative sounded, I thought,

ARAB INTERLUDE

a little nervous. She was close to me, and I ventured to ask her if she had read a book by Mrs. Das, an American artist married to a Hindu. I had met Mrs. Das at Mrs. Naidu's, and she had given me her book, a tragic autobiography entitled *Marriage to India*. It seemed to me that as initiation for what awaited her in India this bride only needed to read that book. She had never heard of it, and was intent upon the spinner.

"When will you come to the United States, Mahatma?"

"Not yet . . ." (and he smiled) "from what I hear America is not ready for my message."

"That isn't true, I assure you everybody over there is crazy about you!"

The Mahatma looked at her with twinkling eyes:

"My well-informed friends tell me that I wouldn't even be a nine days' wonder. After twenty-four hours I'd be relegated to the zoo!"

And so every morning I was a witness of the motley procession.

When my work was finished, I asked the Mahatma what he thought of it. He smiled and answered exactly like Lenin:

"I don't understand anything about it."

I thanked him for having so amiably tolerated me.

He said: "I shall miss you. We have become good friends; I never forget my friends."

I asked if I might assist at the evening prayer.

"The evening prayer," he said, "is open to all those who wish to come. If you'd like to come to the three o'clock in the morning prayer I will arrange

THE GREAT LITTLE MAHATMA

with my friends for you to spend the night at Kingsway Hall. You will have to bring your own blankets, for we are poor there."

Kingsway Hall was organised and run by Miss Leicester, who had devoted her life and fortune to the factory workers of that district.

It was in order to show his appreciation of Miss Leicester and her work that the Mahatma had accepted her invitation to stay during his official visit to England.

I arrived at eight o'clock on a foggy night. Gandhi had not arrived and had forgotten to tell Miss Leicester that he'd invited me.

I drank tea with factory girls and young men in the dance-hall, which reminded me a good deal of Soviet Russia. Then as it was getting late I was taken to my room, which was more like a monastic cell, white, cold, and severe. Access to it was across an open terrace on the roof.

A white-veiled figure was leaning on the parapet: Mirabei looked even more Giotto-esque in the misty night. She was anxious about the Mahatma, who should have been back.

"He works too hard. Nobody spares him, and he doesn't spare himself. I don't know how his health stands it."

She promised to wake me just before three o'clock, but it seemed to me I was awake most of the night. I could not sleep because of the cold. When Mirabei called me I threw on a fur coat and joined her on the terrace. We then went in together to the

ARAB INTERLUDE

Mahatma's cell, which was small and white and cold like mine. Instead of a bed he had a thin mattress on the floor, and was sitting up enveloped in his *Kaddar*. He looked tired and very frail.

As soon as the Hindu secretary had joined us, the lamp was put out, and through the open door came a faint, cold, blue light. The Hindu chant, which lasted six or seven minutes, was not unlike the rhythmic intoning of the Koran.

It was a fantastic experience: Two Hindus and an English Saint chanting Brahman hymns in a small cell on an East End roof at three o'clock on a November morning.

When I got back into bed I seemed to have been dreaming. A little before five o'clock Mirabei awakened me (for I was asleep this time). It was the Mahatma's walking hour, and reputed the best moment to get him to talk! A thick fog prevailed, but undaunted he gathered his *Kaddar* around him and opened the street door. Outside a little party was waiting. two policemen and two detectives. The Mahatma greeted them with a cheerful "Good morning, gentlemen! I'm sorry for you!"

Thereupon, in his sandals and with bare legs he started off at a great pace.

Impossible to see a yard ahead. We had almost to run in order not to lose sight of him.

Behind us, panting and puffing, one heard the heavy footfalls of the detectives. Gandhi knew his way. Fog was nothing to him, he could have done that walk in the pitch dark or with his eyes shut. The path skirted a canal. One could hear the water

THE GREAT LITTLE MAHATMA

that poured through a mill. We passed watchmen huddling over a fire. . . .

There was only room for two abreast and Mirabei pushed me forward: "This is your chance for a talk...."

We had been walking so fast that in spite of the cold I shed my fur coat. Trotting by his side I tried to think of all the things I wanted to say to him, but I was breathless and desperately sleepy.

I remember vaguely that we talked religion rather than politics. He said that the different religions were simply different aspects of the same God worship. It could not be said that one form was better than another. Everything depended on the individual's reaction. He found it easier to approach God through the form in which he had been brought up. He intimated that all those who have a love of truth and sincerity, who have eliminated hatred and bitterness, have an affinity the world over.

I was almost shocked when Lord Londonderry, at a luncheon, asked me: "Does Gandhi hate us very much?"

The idea of Gandhi HATING was such a misconception. He had to combat British Imperialism on account of his convictions and for the liberation of the oppressed Indian masses, but he admitted no hatred and no violence. Victory could only come through self-sacrifice, self-abnegation.

If Gandhi's passive-resistance creed had proven successful a new era would have dawned for the whole world; but his failure has only helped to prove that nothing is accomplished except by violence.

CHAPTER LI

Closed Chapter

"WE all have our dreams," as Trotsky said to me once with a sigh. It seemed to me I had had mine. I had been dreaming in Africa for eight years, and suddenly I awoke and asked myself: "What am I doing here?"

How often have I been asked WHY I had chosen to settle in Africa? The truth is that when I arrived there I was suffering from what the French call *le mal du siècle*: disillusion, discouragement, despair.

I was unsuited to a materialistic world. I would have loved to die, but suicide is futile if one believes in reincarnation. At all events the desert had done its work (I believe I must not mention my soul, it isn't any longer done!) and I was healed! Another chapter was closed.

In the past it had always been so easy to change my life with my change of mind. I had never failed to liquidate my *status quo* by some means or other.

When I decided to leave New York, I gave a party in my studio and invited my friends to take any bronzes, marbles, or plasters that took their fancy. They lightened my burden considerably. What was left I put on a ship and went with it to Hamburg.

CLOSED CHAPTER

When I left Germany I sold my house, furniture, and land at public auction without loss.

In Constantinople a Levantine antiquary bought the contents of my house as soon as the Russian Consul had cancelled my lease.

Now that the Biskra venture was verging on completion—the water concession had at last been granted and electric light been laid on from the town—the house was in every way a civilised and therefore a saleable concern. To my great discomfiture, however, I discovered that the children—having ceased to be children—could no longer be packed up along with the “lares and penates.” The time was past when I could put their hats on their heads and their coats on their backs and say “Come!”

Margaret had developed a will of her own. She claimed Biskra as her home and refused to leave. The mere suggestion of selling it threw her into a fury. She threatened fearful things such as never speaking to me again, leaving for the South on a camel to be no more seen, marrying the first man who asked her, going to the devil in fact . . . all of which I knew she might fulfil, for she is the replica of myself.

Dick was not concerned in this act. He was evolving another kind of life peculiarly his own. His interest in ships, that began on the Bosphorus, had developed at Algiers. He did not care for the desert—he only loved the sea. It looked as if our blessed Trinity had arrived at a parting of the ways. I could not prolong an extinct phase.

I knew that a new chapter was about to begin,

ARAB INTERLUDE

That something awaited me. I had no idea what it would be, but I knew that I must throw myself once more into the fray.

The urge was so great that I could hardly bear that last, long, drawn-out winter. Margaret sensed my awakened restlessness and it made her savage. To be on bad terms with my offspring was a new sensation. It hastened the climax.

On a broiling sirocco morning in May, Dick and I drove to Algiers, leaving Margaret in possession.

I had no idea then that I should never go back. At least when I say NEVER, I mean that I have not been back since. I made a present of it to Margaret when she married the Frenchman of her selection whose career links him to French Africa.

CHAPTER LII

Turmoil

PARIS! Winter of 1933-34. Apartment in the Rue Bonaparte on the corner of the "Quays." Studio, work, friends, a winter without sun. Winter in Paris!

Tuileries Gardens with fountains springing from basins of ice!

Silver plumes of water against grey nakedness of trees in a mist.

Walks along the "quays" by the river's edge, under the bridges.

Notre Dame enframed by a dark archway. Silhouettes of black bare branches, black tree trunks, and black barges. Black reflections in the grey water.

In the background the great old palace of the Louvre.

After the sunny splendour of Africa how lovely this winter in Paris!

Everything is beautiful by contrast.

The events of that winter have passed into history. It is almost impossible now to recall the first public shock caused by the revelation of the Stavisky scandal. It provoked what the French have come to term familiarly *bagarres*. . . . *Bagarres* became part of Paris night life.

ARAB INTERLUDE

They happened mostly in my *quartier*, round about the Boulevard Saint-Germain. They were an entertainment which I seldom missed. Instead of going to the movies I attended the *bagarres*. The only difference was that I went alone, for it was not an amusement shared by any of my friends.

I studied those street rows and their effect on the psychology of the public. The Camelots du Roi were led by Maurice Pugot of the "Action Française" League. They paraded in the Boulevard Saint-Germain ostensibly to march on the Chamber shouting their slogans: "*Conspuez Chautemps!*" and "*Les voleurs en prison!*"

I stopped a party walking arm in arm and asked them to explain the meaning of the word *conspuer*! They all laughed and illustrated it by a gesture that was expressive of being sick.

In those early days people walking home from a movie or a theatre who collided with a *bagarre* merely smiled. After a while they began to side with the Camelots, whom the police handled rather too roughly. Funny people the Paris police. I saw one pursue a youth who was harmlessly walking down a side-street, creep up behind him silently and kick him as hard as possible in the backside. The spirit of the French Revolution seemed to have revived in the police. They beat up those Royalists with all the traditional hatred of the French working classes towards *aristos*. But hit as hard as they would they could neither discourage nor intimidate the Camelots, but they did succeed in alienating the sympathy of the public.

By sheer persistence, by shouting: "*Démission! Démission!*" and kicking up a fuss, the Camelots finally obliged M. Chautemps the Premier to resign!

I felt a personal pride in their victory, for I had more or less done it with them. The elements, too, were on their side, for it hardly ever rained that winter. The cold did not matter, one got warm running. I ran towards any sound of cheering, shouting, or singing. In a charge, it was not necessary for me to run. The police did not molest non-combatants and I did not look like a street-fighter. Sometimes I felt like a ghost unseen in the midst of it all.

On one occasion, however, when everyone was sprinting and the police were in hot pursuit, an arm was linked through mine and a young man leaned towards me confidentially and said: "Excuse me, Madame," with an appreciative little squeeze, "but you see—that '*fuck*'¹ was going to arrest me—I said something to him he didn't like. But the moment he saw we were together he didn't dare, you look like a lady."

He was not the usual type of Camelot; he admitted in fact that he was an Anarchist: "But . . . I will side with any party that undertakes to bring down this filthy government."

We spent the rest of the evening together dodging police charges, linking up with the Camelot groups here and there, helping them to build up barrages across the street with iron benches, watching the Camelot manoeuvres, the scuffles, the outwitting of the police, and talking freely with people in the

¹ Policeman.

ARAB INTERLUDE

street. It was one o'clock in the morning when we parted, and he thanked me for the charming evening he had spent in my company: "Much more entertaining than a cinema," he added, "and cost nothing!"

I also attended Communist meetings at the Salle Bullier, which held ten thousand people. The police were always waiting outside in great numbers, and Camelots would hang about the Boulevards to provoke a row when the meeting was over. The slightest word, a shout, a slogan, and there would be a scuffle. The police worked in groups. Alone they were in danger of their lives. I saw a police cyclist defend himself with his machine against a howling mob ready to lynch him.

Much as I disliked seeing a Camelot beaten up, they were after all young and physically fit, they could take it; but to see an overtired workman felled to the pavement and beaten and kicked so that he had to be carried away on a stretcher was revolting. More often it was the police who started the trouble. I attended a Communist mass-meeting in the Forest of Vincennes: it was a grand picnic. Men brought their families. Children tumbled and laughed in the grass, their mothers in red blouses sat under the trees and ate sandwiches. They did not heed the loud-speakers bellowing forth speeches by Marcel Cachin and André Marty. They adjourned in time to get home to cook the soup, and cheerfully sang the "Internationale" as they marched towards the underground stations. A cinematograph news-reel machine moved along in their midst, and suddenly without

TURMOIL

any apparent provocation the police attacked. I rather suspect the news-reel people bribed them to stage a show. It was a spicy one. Missiles were hurled, and whoever wished to avoid a brick, a bit of jagged iron, or a broken bottle, dived into the entrance of the "Metro" station. From this vantage-point the sheltering Communists shouted coarse insults at the police, who returned them with interest. I happened to find myself on the steps half-way between the opposing parties, when a policeman leant over the balustrade and spat on the howling refugees below. He missed me by a hair's breadth, which provoked my protest. The policeman apologised as gallantly as only a Frenchman knows how, much to the amusement of the onlookers.

The surprising feature of these events was the courtesy of the Parisians towards a foreigner. My attitude was rather that of the Irishman who asked: "Is this a private fight, or can anyone join in?" But nobody ever said: "This is none of your business, clear out!" Not even on the night of the 6th of February. . . .

I had followed so closely the street movement that when not only the Camelots, but the Anciens Combattants, the Croix de Feu, the Jeunesse Patriotes, the Solidarité Française, etc., were called up for a protest parade, I knew there would be trouble.

I telephoned to Peter at our home in Sussex and advised him to join me. He knew little of French politics, but he knew me well enough not to argue. He drove to Folkestone and caught the first boat.

ARAB INTERLUDE

At four o'clock in the afternoon he arrived in Paris; at six we were in the Place de la Concorde. The battle was already in full swing. Dense black masses were swaying forward and retreating before the onslaught of the police. In the middle of the Place a motor bus on fire illuminated the scene. Perhaps it is the last time one will ever see cavalry employed to disperse a crowd. A little tear gas would have settled the trouble very quickly. But I am glad they used old-fashioned methods. It was unforgettably beautiful. The helmets of the Garde Républicaine caught the glow; their sabres glinted and flashed, while the horses' hoofs pounded metallicly upon the asphalt road. I hate horses, and when the Republican Guard charged, my instinct was to run madly with the crowd. Peter linked his arm through mine and held me back.

"Don't run!" he urged. "Don't run. . . ."

His tactic was to walk quietly across the open in a slanting direction, so that the charge passed us by, leaving us on its flank. It was a very sensible manoeuvre if one reflected that horses in full gallop cannot alter course, they can only go headlong or take a wide curve. Naturally one doesn't reflect when one is being charged, and the crowd just fled before them in a panic. Among the trees they were safe, but those that didn't make it in time got horrible flat sword blows.

Peter's calm was admirable—his heart must have been thumping like mine, but he kept his head.

At eight o'clock we joined the Anciens Combattants

TURMOIL

in front of the Petit Palais. They were perfectly organised; each member, wearing his war medals, rallied to the banner of his particular section. One of them said to Peter: "It is imprudent of you to bring your wife, don't you know there's going to be trouble? Orders are given to fire on us."

Peter in his best French explained: "Monsieur, I am a member of the British Legion, Ancien Combattant like yourself, my sister is a war-widow. . . . It is not I who brought her, it is she who brought me."

The officer laughed. "*Bon!* All right—stay with us. . . ." Then another, who had overheard, said to me, "Madame, fear nothing. So long as you are with us you are safe . . . we are a guarantee." We marched with the head of the column. Passing between the Grand and the Petit Palais, a great crowd joined us, the whole world seemed to be singing the "Marseillaise." The sound of those thousands of voices singing in a spirit of fervid patriotism was a mad thrill. I forgot it was not my country, nor my national flag that fluttered above my head, or that the business was no business of mine!

In a kind of delirium we marched singing down the Champs Elysées. At the Concorde the procession divided. Our half turned left up the Rue Royale, bound for the Rue St. Honoré, to call upon the President. The rear half turned right, to cross the bridge leading to the Chambre des Députés to call upon the Premier.

At the end of the Rue Royale the Madeleine, like a Greek temple, was protected by mounted Re-

ARAB INTERLUDE

publican Guard whose Roman helmets gleamed above the surging crowd. We were back in antiquity!

The Rue St. Honoré was too narrow for our procession. I remember voices screaming: "Go back! They are charging us!" and shrieks from the back: "*Avancez!* They are firing!"

It was impossible to go forward or back. One tried not to be pushed through a plate-glass window. I made for the shelter of a doorway, but all doorways were tightly packed. I don't remember what happened. . . . The cavalry went through that dense narrow street, but I never saw it! A man was holding a riderless horse and trying to calm it. Someone seized me by the arm, ran with me through the clearing effected by the cavalry, and in the Rue Boissy d'Anglas—which was quiet by comparison—addressed me in English: "Madame, I advise you to go for safety to the Crillon . . . you are a foreigner and no harm must come to you . . . but I am a Frenchman, I must go back. . . ." He forthwith disappeared into the *mêlée*.

Peter had followed me, and together we beat upon the closed doors of the Crillon Hotel. The arcade on the Concorde side was full of people clamouring for shelter, but the Crillon would not open to them. Happily, I knew Del Piata, an Italian sculptor, who had a studio on the roof. His name after a while gained us admission; the door was opened ajar and we slipped through.

Del Piata was entertaining a party. We must have presented a dilapidated appearance, for he instantly plied us with strong brandies and soda. His terrace

TURMOIL

had a wide stone balustrade and one could climb up among the stone-sculptured armour figures which gave one a feeling of security, and at the same time observe the battle below. One of the maids of the hotel had just been hit by a ricochet bullet on the section of terrace alongside. Among Del Piata's friends were some French people of the old *régime*, who were convinced that another revolution had been loosed.

"*C'est la révolution qui est déclanchée,*" they said. Every man swore that he would be there on the morrow with a loaded revolver.

As soon as we were rested, Peter and I went back into the street; he felt just as I did, the battle called us . . . impossible to keep out of it!

There was a platoon of mounted Republican Guard standing outside the Crillon. Their officer on his horse sat as motionless as though he were cast in bronze. His face beneath the helmet was regular and clear-cut, the face of a Roman legionary. He was so impressive that I nudged Peter.

"Look!" At that moment an absurd little rat of a man confronted the horseman, standing, legs apart, staring up at him, calling him every conceivable insulting name. The officer continued to be made of bronze. Then suddenly he came to life and half-turned his head towards his platoon. Obeying his mere gesture they unsheathed their swords and sprang forward to the charge. We ourselves but just got out of their way in time, so absorbed were we in watching the precipitate flight of the rat! We then crossed the Place, keeping a sharp look-out for police

ARAB INTERLUDE

who were liable to descend upon one with their batons from any direction. They spared no one. I saw a harmless white-bearded old gentleman tapped on the head from behind. He lay where he fell, there being no one near to attend to him. The brutality that night of Frenchmen toward Frenchmen was unbelievable. The police beat people who were already senseless. They kicked them and trod upon their faces. A journalist flourishing a press card was knocked down and the heel of a police boot scrunched out his eye. The details came to light when the individual cases were dealt with in court. It made edifying reading.

We made our way to the famous bridge that was being fought for. It was protected by cavalry and by a barrage of sinister, black police lorries. The Patriots were being kept at bay with a fire-hose.

Suddenly a roar of cheers went up from the on-lookers who were massed on the terrace in front of the Orangerie: Some young Camelots had succeeded in cutting the hose and carried a section of it in triumph. After that one heard the sharp hard crack of rifle-fire. I still would not believe that it was anything but blank shot; somehow I could not imagine English police firing on a crowd of British legionaries covered with medals, carrying the Union Jack, and singing "Rule, Britannia!" no matter what their business was with the Prime Minister. I would have expected the police on the contrary to open up a way for them. However, the facts are there, and the French police, with the mentality of Arabs, seemed only too delighted with this chance for a

TURMOIL

scrap. A man next to me fell and was carried off, his arms hanging limp, his sea-green face thrown back, and a little red fountain spouting from his chest.

At midnight in a state of exhaustion we returned to the Crillon. The hall resembled an ambulance centre. The writing-room had been transformed into a dressing-station. A pathetic sight was a man with two rows of war medals, still clinging tenaciously to a staff bearing the tricolour. He seemed utterly dazed, blood poured down his face.

At one o'clock we went home, but not to sleep. As soon as I closed my eyes I saw that black human wave advance and recede. . . . I heard the horses' hoofs on the hard road . . .

I had never lived more thrilling hours. Peter, who took part in the Battle of Jutland, said that for sheer personal excitement it could not compare with the Battle of the Concorde.¹

Had Daladier not resigned the next day, revolution was a certainty. Maréchal Lyauty, who had been called upon to lead the movement, was unpacking his uniform. . . .

Some French people think it would have been better to have fought it out and cleared up the mess then and there.

It is not true that "the 6th of February" was a

¹ (Our family stars must have been in some strange conjunctions: Dick in a Finnish windjammer was being battered in such a storm that the crew believed it was the end, and Margaret in her little Ford lost her way in the desert and ran out of water. . . . February 6th is the date under which these entries appear in their respective diaries!)

ARAB INTERLUDE

fight against Fascism. Nationalism and patriotism were the features of the movement.

If Fascism exists in France to-day it was provoked into being that night.



I used to wonder as I looked across the desert whether my life that had been so eventful and colourful was meant to peter out in the sands of the desert like those waters of the flood. This last chapter would seem to be the answer. The Arab interlude was a necessary period of calm in which to store up reserves of force. Who knows what new experiences, thrills, emotions lie in store . . . for us all? Who knows?

Maybe this last chapter is merely a prelude.

T

**PRESIDENT'S
SECRETARIAT
LIBRARY**

T